

fake it 'til you make it by thenewromantics

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Summary:

tired of her best friend's constant attempts to set her up with boys who were definitely not her type, el does the first thing she can think of. lies about being in a secret relationship with her brother's best friend mike wheeler, of course. the only problem is that el has a major, major crush on mike and mike has absolutely no idea.

aka a mileven fake dating au

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

ok ok i know i know, i shouldn't be starting a new au when i haven't finished run away with my love but this idea came to me and just wouldn't leave me alone, i had to write it. it's going to be short, maybe 4 chapters and i already have a lot of it mapped out so i'm hoping it won't take long to write.

while not directly based on the novel/netflix film 'to all the boys i've loved before' it's definitely inspired by it and certain story elements from the book will probably make their way into this fic. if you haven't read the book, i highly, highly recommend it.

with that, please enjoy!

El was staring again.

Actually no, not *again*. Saying that she was staring again implied that she had ever stopped. Which she definitely had not.

It wasn't her fault. Really it wasn't. It's just, did he have to be so *cute* all the time? She wouldn't look at him all the time if he didn't constantly walk around being the absolute cutest boy in the entire junior class, no scratch that, in the entire school.

Max teased her all the time saying that she was the only girl who thought Mike Wheeler was the cutest boy in school, but El doubted that. There was absolutely no way that she was the only girl who noticed his sculpted cheekbones and his perfectly tousled hair and the adorable freckles that danced across his face, especially when he smiled.

She heard herself audibly sigh as she watch him walk across the quad, her chin falling into her hand. He was talking animatedly with one of his friends, Will, who also happened to be her stepbrother, and from her seat at one of the picnic tables on the lawn El could see his

eyes lit up as he gestured wildly, Will laughing loudly beside him. The sight made her heart thump happily in her chest.

He was wearing her favorite green sweater today. The one that made his hair look extra soft and brought out the golden flecks in his eyes. It had distracted her in British Lit that morning, the only class her and Mike had together. He sat three rows in front of her but that never stopped her from staring at the back of his head as their teacher lectured on in the background.

Sometimes Mike would turn around, no doubt feeling her eyes on him, and she would drop her head embarrassingly, trying to quell the warming of her cheeks so he wouldn't know she was staring. But usually he never noticed, too concentrated on taking down notes.

Letting her mind drift, she thought about maybe one day not breaking eye contact as he looked at her. Daring herself to hold his gaze, she hoped that if she did that he would maybe smile at her, or give her a small wave. Those both seemed highly unlikely though, chances are if he caught her actually staring at him, he would never talk to her again.

El didn't realize how lost she was in her daydream until she heard a voice next to her.

"Hey, El." El jumped, snapping her head to her left and being met with the easy smile of said subject of her daydream.

"Hi, Mike." She said, clearing her throat, cursing herself for letting her voice come out all high and airy. The last thing she needed was Mike finding out about her gigantic, embarrassing crush on him.

Mike smiled at her softly, before directing his attention back to Will who merely gave his sister a small wave as he took the seat across from her. Mike was sitting to her left and while she knew it was mainly so him and Will could continue their conversation, that didn't stop her heart from beating wildly in her chest at his proximity.

See, while Max knew that El considering Mike to be the cutest boy in school, no one, and that meant absolutely no one, not even Will, knew the true depth of her affection.

No one knew how much her heart fluttered when he smiled at her easily across the lunch table when she said something he thought was funny. Or about the warm sensation she would feel deep in the pit of her stomach when their eyes met, his golden speckled eyes twinkling as they looked into her chocolate brown ones. Or the way her entire body felt like it was on fire on the rare occasion that their arms would brush.

Yes, absolutely no one knew about that.

“So, what are you doing this weekend, El?” Mike asked suddenly. El hadn’t been paying attention to Will and Mike’s conversation, instead choosing to pick at her tuna fish sandwich, trying to ignore how close Mike’s elbow was to her’s.

“Oh, um, probably just having a sleepover with Max, the usual.” She shrugs and Mike nods. One thing she *really* likes about Mike is how he always acts like he’s actually listening to her. Even if he probably doesn’t care that much about what she’s saying.

Because, while he was currently sitting next to her at their usual picnic table, asking her about what she’s doing this weekend, her and Mike aren’t exactly friends. They more just exist in the same circle.

Before El came along, it was just Mike, Will and their two other friends Dustin and Lucas. El joined by default, being Will’s step sister, and later being friends with Max when Max started dating Lucas freshman year. Mike and Will were the ones who were friends, sure, Mike helped her sometimes with her homework and let her borrow his notes if she needed to, but they had never hung out outside of school, or ever had a conversation that wasn’t in front of at least one of their mutual friends.

Which made her all consuming crush on him all the more pathetic.

Sometimes she wondered, if he thought of her as a close friend, or even a friend at all. He was always nothing but kind to her, but he was nice to pretty much everyone. Chances are he was just nice to her because she was Will’s sister.

She wonders if he’ll ever think of her as anything, she doubts it,

really, but a girl can certainly dream.

It all started back in eighth grade.

El was the new girl in town, having just officially moved in with her dad and new step mother after only ever spending every third weekend and two weeks of her summers in Hawkins. Her and her dad had always been close, but after her mama got sick, and Aunt Becky started to worry about how much time she had left, he wanted El to spend as much time with her mom as possible.

But, mama died two weeks before school started and that meant that El was now a full time resident of Hawkins, Indiana.

At first she hated it. She loved finally getting to live with her dad, their visits had always seemed too short and she had always cried having to leave him, and she really liked Joyce and her boys, her new brothers, but it just wasn't home.

It didn't take long for her to love it though, between late night movie sessions with Will and long car rides blasting music with Jonathan and family dinners where Joyce would hug her shoulders and her dad would kiss the top of her head, it started to feel like it.

Then she met Mike.

Well, she didn't so much meet Mike as she did run into him in the hallway.

She had been looking for Mr. Clarke's classroom, turns out that her and Will had vastly different schedules, only meeting for lunch and their afternoon art class, so she was pretty much on her own in trying to find anything. The hallways were basically empty, everyone already in class, but the bell hadn't rung quite yet.

El had been so focused on reading the names next to the classroom doors that she had failed noticed someone coming towards her until she slammed right into them, falling straight to the ground.

“Oh my god, I’m so sorry.” The other person said, immediately helping her to feet. El sighed, trying her hardest not to cry. “I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

When El looks up to thank the boy, definitely a boy, who helped her, she feels her breath leave her lungs. Because the boy who is standing in front of her is the cutest boy she’s ever seen in her life. Sure, she’s only thirteen and she’s only met a handful of boys, but she is absolutely certain that he’s the cutest one.

She’s so distracted by him that she barely hears the bell ring. He does and he’s jumping away from her like she’s on fire.

“Sorry again!” He calls as he runs past her in the direction he had been heading before. El watches after him, a small sigh on her lips.

She decides that she just might like Hawkins after all.

Of course later that day she learns that his name is Mike and he’s one of Will’s best friends. She’s heard all about Will’s friends, about their adventures and their lifelong pledge to always be there for each other, but she never imagined any of them being as cute as Mike is.

Obviously though, she is not complaining one bit.

“Ellie, when are you just going to man up and get a boyfriend?” El sighs, pushing her hair from her face so she can glare at her best friend.

Said best friend looks as innocent as ever, hanging over the end of El’s bed, red hair fanning around her like a halo. They’re in El’s room for their weekly sleepover, half eaten pizza crusts and empty soda cans scattered on the floor as they make their way through their usual conversation topics and El had been praying that for once Max wouldn’t bring this one up.

She should have known she wouldn’t get so lucky.

“Max, I’ve told you a million times that I don’t want or need a boyfriend.” El says, crossing her arms. And she means it. Sure, boys are cute, well one boy in particular is, but that does not mean that El wants a boyfriend, especially if it’s one that Max is trying to set her up with.

“No one needs a boyfriend, Ellie, but they’re so much fun.” Max’s eyes light up and El knows that Max is thinking of her own boyfriend, Lucas. El was always happy to know that Max was with someone who made her eyes like that but she does not need to know what kind of *fun* Max is referring to.

El shakes her head though, holding her ground. “Even if I wanted a boyfriend, which I don’t, I don’t even know who I would date.”

She quickly realizes that that was the wrong thing to say as Max sits up quickly, her face turning red from how fast she moved, but Max hardly pays any mind to that, her face already in a mischievous smirk. That smirk was *never* a good sign.

“Ellie are you aware how many boys would be absolutely dying to go on a date with you!” Max exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air. El rolled her eyes, Max had told her time and time again that there were apparently hundreds of boys at Hawkins High that would want to date her but considering most of the boys at Hawkins High had never even spoken to her before she really doubted Max was telling the truth.

“Max, I really don’t want you to set me up.” El said, already knowing the gears that were turning in her best friend’s head. Max pouted slightly, but El knew that it wasn’t in defeat. No, Max was now thinking about what she was going to have to say to get El to listen to her and agree to a date.

It wasn’t that Max had bad taste when it came to boys that she wanted to set El up, it’s just that, absolutely none of them were El’s type. From Johnny Earl, who was cute and sweet, but only cared about scholastic decathlon and being the smartest in the class to Peter St. Clair, who was a little on the shorter and *definitely* high the one time that El talked to him, Max just did not know El’s type.

Even though El's type really could be spelled out in four simple letter. M-I-K-E.

"C'mon Ellie, what do you have to lose. I have the perfect guy in mind for you." Max practically begs, clasping her hands together. "He's in my chemistry class and he's so cute and he's actually nice."

El pretends to consider this but quickly shakes her head. "Sorry not gonna happen."

She hopes that maybe this will be the end of it, but she sees Max pursing her lips and knows that it definitely is *not*. El knows that she needs to come up with something, and fast, or she's going to end up on a date with whatever totally out of place boy by the next week's end.

"Ellie, I really think you're just cutting yourself short." Max starts, getting up and perching herself on the arm of the chair in the corner of El's room, where El is curled up in on herself. "You need to get out there." El smiles as her friend tucks a piece of hair behind her ear and feels her heart warm in her chest.

Even though she definitely does not want to date any of the boys Max wants her to date, she knows her friend's heart is in the right place and that makes her grin from ear to ear. That doesn't mean she's going to cave though. Nope. Not at all.

The next words come out of El's mouth before she even knows what she's saying. "I already have a boyfriend."

Max's fingers stop their movement in El's hair and she jerks herself off the arm of the chair and puts her hands on El's shoulders, forcing El to look her. Confusion is written all over her best friend's face and El hopes her own face doesn't betray her.

"You have a boyfriend." She doesn't phrase it like a question, but El nods regardless. "Like a real boyfriend?"

"Yes." She says quietly, not trusting herself to say anymore than that. El has absolutely *no* idea where she pulled this out of but now that she's said it, she can't take it back now.

"How come you never told me about him?" Max asks, looking slightly hurt. Sure, her and Max both have their own set of secrets, El knew there were things that she didn't know about her best friend and vice versa, but El knows it hurts Max to know that her best friend kept something this big from her.

"We didn't want to tell anyone and it's kind of a new thing." El says, the lie falling from her lips easier than she expected. She shrugs, hoping that Max believes her. Her and Max don't lie to each other very often, so El is scared that Max will see right through her.

But instead, Max drops her hands and *huh* s softly to herself. She still looks a little hurt, but now there's also curiosity and intrigue bouncing on her features. Curiosity and intrigue that honestly *terrify* El. Max has always been good at getting information about of her.

"Who is this mysterious boyfriend then, or do you not want to tell me?" Max asks, raising her eyebrow, almost as if she's challenging El. Challenging her to either confirm her story, or admit that the whole thing is a lie.

El has never been more determined to lie in her entire life.

"No, I'll tell you." She says, crossing her arms across her chest and lifting her chin. Max merely watches her, her brow still cocked, waiting.

She determines that she has probably ten seconds, at most, to come up with her lie. Or else Max will call her bluff and not only will she have to suffer through even more *totally wrong* boys her friend will set her up with, but she has absolutely no doubt Max would tease her endlessly for trying to lie about having a boyfriend.

Her first thought is to say that it's someone Max doesn't know, someone from her old town. But she knows that wouldn't work, she hadn't gone and visited her Aunt Becky in almost six months. Max would see through her right away, mainly because El *always* talked about how mean the boys had been at her old school. Not to mention, Max and El hung out almost every single weekend, so she would hardly believe that El had a secret boyfriend in a completely different town.

The next idea that crossed her mind was picking a random boy at school. Maybe a boy from another class that Max probably wouldn't interact with on a daily basis. Someone that she could easily fake a break up with a week or so, and Max would take pity on her and her heartbreak and wait at least two weeks before trying to set her up again. Christmas break was in three weeks, so El thinks for a minute that this could work. But, then she realizes that she doesn't actually talk to many boys, well any outside of her circle, at school and Max knows this.

So that leaves their small group of mutual friends. Will, Lucas, Dustin and of course, Mike.

At first El is hesitant of even considering using one of their friends as her so called boyfriend, especially because Max spends time with El and the boys almost every day, but so far it's the best El's got.

Lucas is, obviously, off the table. Even if it wasn't for his long term relationship with Max, him and El would make absolutely *no* sense as a couple. El likes Lucas, adores him really, but they would be even more unevenly matched than some of the boys Max sets her up with. Will, like Lucas, is a very obvious no. Besides the fact that he's her step brother, he's also not into girls, a fact that Max is very much aware of.

Initially, El thinks that Dustin might be the perfect boy to be her fake boyfriend. She's always really liked Dustin, he's funny and sweet and he calls her Ellie Belly and laughs at her jokes, even when they're not actually worth laughing at. He also probably would help her if she asked, and would even help her stage quite an extravagant break up. But, unfortunately, she remembers, he's been talking about this girl from drama club for like three weeks straight, that it would be hard for anyone, Max especially, to believe that he had been secretly dating El this whole time.

Which left...

"Mike." His name leaves her mouth before she realizes what she's saying. Immediately El can feel her cheeks heat up and there's a beat of silence between her and Max before Max lets out a snort of disbelief.

“Wheeler?” Both of her eyebrows are now raised, threatening to disappear into her hair. “Yeah, sure.”

El bristles, annoyed, but she’s not quite sure why. “What does that mean?”

“What do I mean?” Max rolls her eyes and El squares her shoulders, feeling insulted. “I just mean that you and Wheeler seem incredibly, incredibly unlikely.”

There’s a tone to Max’s voice that El can’t seem to put her finger on. She knows that Max and Mike have never been the best of friends, they tolerate each other at best, but still, Max’s outward disbelief that Mike and El could ever be together gnaws at her.

“And why’s that?” El asks, folding her arms across her chest. She knows she shouldn’t be getting this upset about it, her and Mike aren’t actually together, nor will they ever be. She doesn’t even know why she said his name in the first place.

Max sighs, taking a step back and sitting on the edge of El’s bed. “I don’t know El.” She bites her lip. “Because he’s Mike, a gigantic nerd and you’re, you.”

The explanation doesn’t make El feel any better, nor does it really make much sense. The implication that Mike somehow wouldn’t be a good match for her simply because he’s a nerd angers her more than it should.

Because while yes, Mike Wheeler is a gigantic nerd, he’s also kind and cute and any girl, El very much included, would be lucky to be able to call him hers.

“Well, it’s can’t be that unlikely, since it’s true.” El says, the lie slipping easily off of her tongue. This time is less about getting Max to leave her alone, and more about trying to prove her wrong.

Max must be able to feel El’s persistence because she holds up her hands. “Hey, I’m not saying that I don’t believe, I’m just saying it seems highly unlikely.” She shrugs. “Weirder things have happened, I suppose.”

There's a beat of silence between the two friends, and El prays that the conversation is dropped after this. The less lies that come spilling out of her mouth, the easier it will be to clean up before school again on Monday. But, El should know her best friend better by now to know she's not getting out of it that easy.

"Why didn't you tell anyone? I mean, we're all friends right, so why keep it a secret?" Max asks, seemingly genuinely curious. El feels the hairs on the back of her neck stand, and she has to rub her hands against her sweatpants to keep them from sweating. "It's just, I doubt any of us would have cared, except for maybe Will, but that's just because he's your brother."

El shrugs. "I don't know, I guess we just saw how annoying people can be when couples start dating that we thought it would be easier if we didn't tell anyone." She curses herself for letting the lie fall so easily from her lips, as she's only digging herself in an even bigger hole that she's going to have to attempt to get out of later, but she can't stop.

"How long have you guys been together?" Max asks, eyebrows knitted together in confusion. No doubt Max is trying to map out the timeline in her head, and El has to think fast to come up with something believable.

"Over Thanksgiving break." She lies. It seems like the most believable option, Max's dad had come to visit and El hadn't seen her for a couple of days. In reality, El had spent every day, except for the Thanksgiving holiday itself, alone in her room, but Max didn't need to know that. "Mike came over one day to hang out with Will and it just kind of happened."

That part wasn't a total lie, Mike had come over the day after Thanksgiving to play video games and watch movies with Will, but El hadn't exactly been invited and she spent most of the day in her room, trying not to listen to their conversation.

Max hums to herself and El feels her heart beating in her chest. Whether it's from all the lying or from the thought of Mike and her being together, she's not sure. All she knows is she hopes now Max will be sufficiently pleased with this information and drop it.

The wheels are already running through her head of how she'll be able to get herself out of this one, hopefully without anyone outside of Max having to find out about it. She could stage a break up over the phone tomorrow before Max leaves, but no, that would be too obvious. She could swear Max to secrecy and then tell her they broke up in a couple of weeks, but Max would probably cave and tell Lucas eventually, which was a *definite* no as Mike could absolutely not find out about this.

She would probably die if he did.

Max's voice breaks El's train of thought. "So, how do you think I would look with purple hair?"

El breathes a small sigh of relief, and just like that the topic is dropped.

El avoids Max's calls for the rest of the weekend.

It's not that she doesn't want to talk to her best friend, and she feels a twist of guilt in her stomach every time she rolls over and pretends to be asleep when her dad knocks on the door telling her Max is on the phone, but she just can't. She can't risk digging herself even deeper into her hole of lies.

Instead, she spends the rest of the weekend figuring out what she's going to do.

She knows she has to do something, she can't just avoid talking about it ever again and just hope that Max forgets about it. She knows her best friend well enough to know that this is something that Max is never, ever going to forget about.

By the end of the weekend, El has a list, albeit a very short one, of her options and a the pros and cons of all of her options. Will had asked her what she was writing when he had popped in her doorway Saturday night after dinner, but El had thrown her schoolwork over it

before he could get a good look at it.

Rule number one of the list was that no one was allowed to see it.

Her first option was admitting to Max that she had made the whole thing up. She doesn't necessarily have to admit that it was so Max would stop setting her up with people, and Max would probably think it was funny. But, she also doesn't want to hear Max laugh about how right she was that El and Mike would never happen, and how funny the mere idea of them would be.

She quickly decides that she doesn't want to do that, even if that means complicating things for herself.

Her second, and only other, option is to tell Mike. The thought of admitting to him that she had lied to her best friend about them being in a secret relationship, when they hardly were even friends, was *majorly* embarrassing, but it would be a lot easier to keep up the facade if Mike was in on it too. But does she really want to do that? Pretend to be in a relationship with the boy who she's practically been in love with since middle school? Would he even want to help her?

It's the doubt she feels on the last question that makes her walk into school on Monday with absolutely zero plan of how she's going to get herself out of this one.

"Hey, space cadet." She feels and hears Max before she sees her, her best friend's nails pinching her bare arm as she comes up behind her. El snorts at the nickname, it's the one Max always uses when El goes a day without talking to her.

"Ow! What?" El says, grabbing her arm from Max's grip and turning to look at her.

"So, I've been thinking about you and Wheeler." El has to hold back a groan, one because Max thinking is usually never a good sign and two, this means she definitely has not dropped the subject, at all. That terrifies her.

"What about us exactly?" El asks, ignoring the way her heart flutters

as she refers to her and Mike as “us”. She knows it’s pathetic but considering they’ll never actually be together, she supposes she should enjoy it while she can.

Max shrugs, looking bored and uninterested, but El knows her enough to know she is in fact very interested in El’s new “relationship.”

“I just think that the you guys shouldn’t be so secretive about it. Just come right out and be together, y’know?” El feels her eyes go wide, shaking her head slowly. “Don’t shake your head at me.”

“Max, there’s a reason we don’t want anyone to know.” She says quietly. El also looks around to see if anyone heard her, but no one has given the pair a glance as they’ve walked by them. “You knowing doesn’t change that.”

“But it could.” Max says. El gulps. “I just want you to be happy, El. And I don’t think dating a boy and not telling anyone is making you very happy.” El felt her spine straighten, wondering where the hell Max had gotten that kind of idea.

“What on earth do you mean?” She asked. “I’m perfectly happy, I would rather secretly date someone then tell everyone and potentially ruin everything.”

El knew she was speaking quickly and her voice was getting more high pitched as she spoke, she just really did *not* like where this conversation was going. The whole point of telling Max and her and Mike were secretly dating was so she would never actually have to tell Mike about it.

“I don’t know why you got it in your head that dating out in the open would ruin your relationship, because it doesn’t really make any sense.” Max says. “Unless there’s another reason you don’t want to tell anyone.” Max has a look in her eye that makes El’s blood run cold and she shakes her head immediately.

“No, of course not.” Looking over her shoulder, El spots Mike. He’s by his locker, as he always is this time of the morning. El’s locker isn’t anywhere around here, but she always walks into the school this

way, via the side door by the teacher parking lot, partly because there aren't as many people as there are in the hallway but mainly because she always gets to school right around the time in which Mike is at his locker. "In fact, I'll prove it to you."

Max looks confused, her eyebrow arched. El doesn't wait for her to ask though, because she feels a surge of adrenaline coursing through her veins and with one small smile at her friend she turns on her heels and begins making her way to Mike's locker.

As her feet guide her to Mike, who's wearing navy blue sweater today today that she's never seen before but she already loves, her mind races a million miles per hour. She has no idea what she is going to say, or do, when she reaches his side but at this point it's too late to turn back and her legs seem to be moving all on their own.

"Oh. Hey, El." Mike says when he sees her coming, giving her that same easy smile he seems to always give her. Her heart aches at the sight of it. "How was your weekend?"

El knows what Mike is probably expecting. A returned smile, a simple answer about how she had a good weekend and hates how quickly it went. Those are how most of their interactions go so why would Mike expect anything else. Except that's not what El does.

She kisses him.

Her heart is racing in her chest and her mind is just a jumble of words and noises as her lips press against his. She has no idea what possessed her to kiss him but it's too late now. Her stomach is exploding with butterflies and the rest of the world is fading around her, surrounding her in a cloud.

Mike is confused she can tell, with the way his lips are static against hers and his hands are hovering around her elbows. He doesn't pull away though, not even when someone whistles somewhere from behind him.

El's mind is fuzzy when she finally pulls herself back, and all she can do is blink because, *did she really just do that?* Letting her fingers ghost over her own lips, her eyes drift up to Mike, whose mouth is

puckered while his cheeks are light pink with blush. He looks like he's trying to figure out what to say to her, and El feels her stomach twist uncomfortably.

"I have to go." Is all she manages to mutter before she's brushing past him and walking quickly down the hallway.

People whisper as she walks by them, and she instantly regrets what she did. Why had she kissed him like that? Without even asking him first? And in front of everyone like that? *God*, he probably hated her now, what kind of person does something like that?

Once she's safely around the corner and out of sight of anyone who would have witnesses the kiss, she lets out a breathe, leaning against a row of lockers. She feels tears begin to prickle in the corner of her eyes but she shakes them away before they can fall and anyone can notice them.

She can't believe she embarrassed herself like that. It would be a miracle, honestly, if Mike ever talked to her again.

The bell rings and El sighs, pushing herself away from the lockers. She can feel people looking at her as they walk by, some look impressed but most just look confused. Either because they had never noticed her before until now, or because they, like Max, couldn't fathom the idea of her and Mike together.

She hates herself for kissing him. For taking him completely by surprise and doing it in front of a bunch of their classmates. She hates herself for even lying to Max in the first place, she should have just been honest and told her friend the truth. But instead she lied, and lied, and lied, about it. Kissing Mike was just the final nail in the coffin, she was officially screwed.

But mainly? She hated herself for enjoying the kiss so much.

Somehow El manages to avoid all of her friends that morning.

While Max was the only one, besides Mike, who directly had witnessed the kiss, she had no doubt that Will, Dustin and Lucas knew about it too. El was pretty sure the whole school knew about it at this point.

Luckily, the only people she shares any of her morning classes with are Mike, who she avoids by showing up to class right before the bell rings and asking the teacher something as soon as class ends, and Dustin, who she shares her home economics class with. They're in different groups this semester, so avoiding him is pretty easy. He glances over at her occasionally as they learn about the ins and outs of repairing a ripped seam, but she doesn't make eye contact.

However, she can do little to avoid the whispers.

El never really realized how much people paid attention to her until she heard what seemed like dozens of her classmates whispering about her and Mike's kiss. Classmates she didn't even know knew she existed, and certainly classmates she had never spoken to before.

"Did you hear about her laying one on the Wheeler kid this morning?" She overhears some football player, Jake, she thinks his name is, whispering to one of his friends during her geography class.

No one directly asks her about it though, whether that be because that don't actually care that much, or because they're uncomfortable asking, El doesn't know. But she's not going to complain, because honestly? She would have no idea what to say in response to anyone's questions.

By the time lunch rolls around, El just wants to not hear about it anywhere. Between the whispers and the glances, she just needs twenty minutes of quiet. Especially because the alternative is going to sit with her friends, and Mike, none of whom she wants to face. Mike especially.

So she goes to the library.

There are a couple of random students scattered around, mainly seniors and freshman, as most other kids like to spend time in the quad during lunch, so it's perfect, really. El finds herself an empty

table near the back, surrounded by a couple of book shelves and revels in the first piece of privacy and peace she's had all day. Even in the bathroom it had been impossible to escape the whispers.

Setting her head down on the table, she takes a deep breath, letting the air fill her lungs and calm her. While the peace and quiet is nice for the time being, she still needs to figure out what she's going to say to Mike next time she sees him, that is if he ever talks to her again.

However, turns out she has far less time to figure it out then she thinks.

"Um, hey." She hears, jumping up in her seat. Her face reddens when she sees Mike next to her, his hand gripping the back of the chair next to her, his lips pursed. "Do you mind if I sit here?"

She nods, gulping. Her hands begin to shake and she pulls them into her body and under the table so he won't see them.

"So, uh..." Mike starts, shifting in his seat.

"I'm sorry!" El nearly shouts, immediately clamping one of her hands over her mouth. The librarian looks over in their direction, but merely eyes her before turning her attention back to what she was doing. "I uh, mean, I'm sorry about earlier."

Mike nods, his fingers tapping against the wood of the table. El can also see his leg bouncing, and she feels guilt begin to gnaw at her.

"I guess, I just wanted to ask why you uh, did that?" Mike asks, his voice strangely soft. He sounds genuinely curious, no hint of anger or even annoyance present in his tone. This surprises her and she has to resist the urge to let out a sigh of relief. At least he doesn't hate her.

"Well," she knots her fingers together nervously. "This is going to sound really dumb, but I was trying to prove something, to Max."

That's not even close to being the entire truth, but El's too embarrassed to explain the rest and it's not like what she said was a lie. She had been trying to prove something to Max.

Sure, she had been trying to prove that Mike was in fact her secret boyfriend when in reality he was anything but. Doesn't mean what she said wasn't true.

Mike's eyebrows come together, furrowed in adorable confusion and El's heart twists in her chest. "What were you trying to prove?"

She wonders if it would be worth it to just admit the truth to him. Just tell him about how she lied to Max. Sure, she would be risking him potentially hating her, but better to just tell the whole story. That way at least someone knows the truth.

"Honestly." El sighs, running her fingers through her hair. "I might have told Max a couple of days ago that you were my secret boyfriend and she was trying to get me to prove it because she didn't believe me."

The words come tumbling out of her mouth before she can stop them, her eyes refusing to meet his, too afraid of his reaction. She can hear his let out a breath and her stomach swoops.

"Why?" This causes her to look at him, her eyes scanning his face. He still looks like he's trying to process what she said, but there's not a trace of anger or disgust etched in his features. Just confusion, and something else El can't quite understand. "Why did you tell her that?"

"This is going to sound so stupid." She whispers, rolling her eyes. Mike shakes his head.

"Just tell me, I won't judge, promise." His voice comes out so kind and understand, she swears she might vomit, but she still fears what the explanation might make him think of her. She must look unconvinced because Mike continues. "I'm just really confused, El. The last thing I was expecting this morning was for you to just come up and kiss me, so all I want to know is why it happened."

"Yeah, you're right. That's only fair." She says. "For months now Max has been trying to set me up with various guys who she thinks would be "totally perfect" for me." El starts and Mike snorts next to her.

"Is that why you went to homecoming with Bobby DiMarco, the senior who got suspended a couple weeks ago for spray painting "eat my fart" on the side of Mr. Larson's car?" Mike asks, amusement rounding the edge of his voice. El can't help but giggle, nodding.

"Yeah, that would be why. Usually I'm able to get out of it, but I was just so sick of Max thinking she knows what kind of guys are perfect for me, so I lied and told her I already had a boyfriend."

"So you told her we were dating?"

"Not at first, no." El says, biting her lip. "At first I was just going to make someone up, say I met them somewhere else, but I realized Max would probably figure out I was lying. The only people she would have believed were you, or any of the other boys. Lucas was obviously off the table, and so was Will."

"And Dustin?"

"I didn't think Max would believe he was my secret boyfriend when all he does is talk about that girl from drama club."

"Ahh." Mike says, smiling slightly. The sight makes El's heart race. Does this mean he's not mad at her?

"I really am sorry, for dragging you into it. I honestly never even wanted you to find out." She says, shaking her head.

"So what was your plan?" He asks, seeming equal parts genuinely curious and teasing her for her bad planning.

She cringes, feeling every inch of her body curl into itself. "Honestly, my plan was to have figured something out by this morning so that you would never have to find out about it. I spent all weekend trying to come up with something but I couldn't. Then this morning, Max cornered me and it seemed like kissing you was the only solution."

(Truthfully, it seems like kissing Mike the only solution to a lot of El's problems, but she pushes away the voice in her head that tells her so.)

"I really am sorry, I swear I just said it to get Max off my back about setting me up with some boy. I never meant for it to get this far."

Mike nods, seemingly in understanding.

There's a beat of silence and El risks looking at Mike as he thinks over what she just told him. He still doesn't look angry or weirded out, in fact he looks almost *amused* by the whole thing, and not in a mean spirited kind of way either. El's stomach is aflutter with butterflies and she swallows to calm herself.

"Do you need help at all?" He asks a couple seconds later, hands folded in front of him. El's face scrunches, confused. "With lying to Max? Or did you tell her the truth after what happened this morning."

El is still taken aback by his words, wondering what he means by help, but she shakes her head. "I haven't talked to her since what happened this morning."

"So she still thinks that I'm your secret boyfriend?" He asks, raising an eyebrow. El nods. "Do you want her to keep thinking that, I mean wouldn't be a secret anymore I guess, but do you want her to keep thinking I'm your boyfriend or tell her the truth?"

If she didn't know any better she would say that Mike is offering to fake date her in order to help her lie to Max. But she knows that can't be what's happening here. Because that kind of stuff doesn't happen in real life, that only happens in romance novels and those rom coms that only Joyce will watch with her. And her life is most definitely not a rom com.

"Because, if you wanted her to keep thinking I was your boyfriend, I wouldn't mind helping you." Mike says when El goes a couple seconds without saying anything.

"Are you offering...?" El finally manages to get out, not being able to find the right words to finish her question. Mike laughs.

"Am I offering to be your fake boyfriend to help you lie to your best friend?" El can only laugh breathlessly, sure that she was only seconds away from being snapped awake. This had to be a dream, it just had to be. "Yeah I guess I am."

“I mean,” El says, still struggling to find the words she wants to say. “At this point I don’t know if I’m quite ready to own up to Max that I was lying about the whole thing.”

Mike chuckles softly, head dropping before he shakes it and looks across the table at her. “Well then, I guess you can call me your fake boyfriend.” He looks amused by his own words and El feels like she’s having an out of body experience.

Because Mike Wheeler is not only totally okay with her lying to Max about him being her secret boyfriend, he’s now offering to be her fake boyfriend. There’s no way any of this can be real.

“Why?” She finds herself asking, still confused as to why Mike is so willing to help her. He shrugs, eyes looking around before falling back on her.

“I guess I just know how persistent Max can be and it sounds like she really won’t let this whole setting you up thing go, so I wanna help. Also it’s always pretty funny when Max gets proven wrong.” He smirks and El has to laugh in agreement. Max isn’t wrong very often, so it’s always fairly amusing, and noteworthy, when she is.

“Oh.” She says, feeling suddenly breathless and light headed. There’s still a lot that they need to talk about, logistics, what exactly them being fake boyfriend and girlfriend entails, her asking him if he really wants to do this, but she’s cut off from breaching any of those subjects by the loud shrill of the bell.

Mike stands, shouldering his backpack. “Do you wanna come over after school? So we can talk more about this. Figure everything out?”

El nodded, her heart skipping a couple beats. Mike is inviting her over to his house? Alone? That had certainly never happened before.

“Cool, I’ll uh, meet you out front after the last bell. See you later, El.” And with that, he gives her a wave and disappears around a bookshelf and out of sight. El stays frozen though, the last twenty minutes running through his head like a tape on fast forward.

Mike doesn’t hate her. He wants to help her. He invited her over to

his house. There was too much for her to digest and it's not like she can go to Max about it, no, that was *definitely* off the table. But one thing definitely stands out, Mike wanted to fake date her.

Mike Wheeler, her kind of friend and now fake boyfriend. Who she still has the most pathetic crush on in the entire world. How was she going to pretend to date him when she couldn't even look at him without feeling like her entire body was going to explode.

This was so not going to end well.

Notes for the Chapter:

so viola!! mike and el are now fake boyfriend and girlfriend but i think we all know that it won't stay that way for long. hopefully you enjoyed! i'm really excited about this fic and hope everyone else is too!!

so with that, lemme know what you think! also feel free to hit me up on tumblr at the username finnwolfhards if you ever want to yell at me about mileven, stranger things or just life in general.

until next time!

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

ok wow!!! firstly i just want to say thank you SO MUCH to every single person who left a comment on the first chapter of this fic, i never expected to get so much love on this fic and it truly makes me so so happy. you guys are all so so amazing and i love all of you so much.

this chapter is a real doozy and clocks in at about 10.7k words and i honestly had so much fun writing it. unlike chapter 1 this chapter has mike and el povs, so i hopefully that doesn't get too confusing.

anyways!! thank you guys so much again for the love on chapter 1, i hope this chapter delivers and doesn't disappoint! also HUGE shout out to the lovely julie (FateChica) for allowing me to yell at her through the writing process of this entire fic.

I have no idea what the hell I'm doing .

That's the thought that's running through Mike's head as he stands in the middle of his kitchen. He's supposed to be grabbing snacks and sodas for him and El, to enjoy while they discuss the oh so interesting events that occurred earlier today, but instead he's about five seconds away from totally losing his goddamn mind as his mind runs at a mile a minute trying to comprehend how the *hell* he had ended up here.

Here, of course, being in a fake relationship with his best friend's step sister.

His best friend's very pretty step sister, that is.

No, he said to himself, shaking his head, that's so not important right now. Right now she's just your friend, you think, who needs your help. That's it.

Even if that help comes in the form of pretending to date her. God, Mike has no fucking idea what is going on in his life anymore. This morning he was just Mike Wheeler, president of the AV club and resident nerd of Hawkins High. Now suddenly he was still all those things but he was also Mike Wheeler, fake boyfriend to El Hopper.

(he somehow is able to ignore the weird tug deep within him that protests to the word fake)

With a sigh, Mike realizes that he can't stay up here much longer. That El is downstairs in the basement waiting for him, that by now she probably thinks he's ignoring her or that he's run away from his own house to avoid her by how long he's been up here.

Grabbing a bag of tortilla chips and two cans of cola from the fridge, Mike makes his way back down to the basement, swallowing sharply when he notices El sitting in the same place that she was when he disappeared a couple minutes ago.

"You're back." She says, almost sounding relieved. Mike feels a twinge of guilt twist at his gut and he swallows roughly, placing the chips and sodas on the table. El gives him a small grin.

"Yeah, sorry." He mutters, sitting down next to her, his leg immediately beginning to bounce with nerves. He had no idea he would be so *nervous* about being alone with her. "I had to uh, do something upstairs." He says, cringing at the way the words stumble out of his mouth.

"Mike." She says, sounding way more calm than he feels, his heart thumping in his chest and his fingers moving erratically against his leg. "It's alright." She smiles, something flashing across her face that Mike can't quite put his finger on, but he smiles back, his fingers slowing their movement against his thigh.

There's a few beats of silence between them, El is looking around his basement, undoubtedly trying to get a feel for the space and Mike watches her curiously. He tries to think of the last time, if there is a last time at all, El had been over to his house. She looks so out of place, but at the same time, so perfect in the well worn and loved room that it seems crazy that Mike can't ever think of a time she had

been over before.

And then it hits him, he remembers perfectly the last time she had been in this very basement.

“You were my first kiss, you know.” The words fall from his lips before his brain can catch on to what he’s saying. El’s eyes snap from the bookcase across the room to his face, her lips forming a small ‘o’.

It had been Dustin’s fourteenth birthday. He insisted having his party at Mike’s house, claiming it was a way better party house *and* his mom’s cats wouldn’t be bothering them the whole time. At first it was just supposed to be the four of them but then Will had asked if El could come, she was still new at the time and apparently Will’s mom and step dad were nervous she wasn’t making friends.

The party had been relatively run of the mill, even with the addition of El. She watched silently from Will’s side as the boys played D&D, she had even gotten Dustin a birthday present, it wasn’t until Dustin suggested truth or dare that things got interesting. He had insisted that they play because *“it’s my birthday and all I want to do is watch you guys make fools out of yourselves”*

Being fourteen, their dares were pretty lame. Prank call the next door neighbor, steal Nancy’s diary and hide it somewhere else in the house, try and swipe as many cookies before Mrs. Wheeler notices. Standard middle school stuff, that was until it was Mike’s turn.

“Dare.” He had said, remembering the way he had suddenly gotten nervous when he had spotted the smirk on Dustin’s face. The memories all came flooding back to him as he recalled the dramatic way that Dustin had cleared his throat before daring Mike to kiss the only girl at the party, El.

El had looked just as freaked out as Mike had felt. Her face going bright red and her mouth falling open in shock. Mike’s heart had drummed against his rib cage, threatening to break free. The whole room had gone quiet, of maybe Mike had just closed off every sound that wasn’t his own breathing, as him and El leaned towards each other. They both had known protesting Dustin’s request would have been pointless, it was his birthday, after all.

The kiss itself had been no more than one second, but it had been Mike's first and he had never forgotten it.

"I honestly didn't know you would have remembered that." El said, snapping Mike back to the present, where she still looked like she was trying to digest what he had said. "The only reason I remember it is because it was the first time I realized how ruthless Dustin can be sometimes."

Despite the embarrassing blush that Mike can feel creeping up onto his cheeks, he can't help but snort at her words. "Yeah well, not everyday one of your best friends forces you to kiss someone." Mike says, trying to sound nonchalant about the whole thing.

He doesn't notice the way that El's face falls, even if just for a moment.

"Well, speaking of kisses, I wanted to apologize again about this morning." El says, biting her lip. Mike shrugs, he didn't really understand why she kept apologizing. Sure, it had been super weird and probably if it was some girl he didn't know he would have been more upset, but once he knew why she had done it, he hadn't really cared that much.

"You don't have to keep apologizing." He said softly, giving her a small smile. "I don't think I would have agreed to be your fake boyfriend if I wanted more apologies."

El giggles lightly, the sound filling the basement easily, Mike smiles. "I guess you are right about that. Speaking of fake boyfriends, I honestly have no idea where to start with this." She gestures around them, as if the empty space that surrounds the two of them is supposed to explain what she means.

"You've never asked someone to be your fake boyfriend before?" Mike teases, knocking her arm lightly with his elbow. She blushes and Mike ignores the way his heart pitter patters in his chest happily.

"No, I have most certainly never done anything like this before." She says, looking embarrassed. "Have you ever been someone's fake boyfriend before?" At first Mike thinks that she's teasing him, but her

voice sounds genuine and her eyebrow is raised in question. "Because you seemed very, uh," she clears her throat, "confident."

Mike pauses. Had he really seemed confident when he had offered to help her? He supposed he hadn't been nervous about it, at least not enough that it would show. Truthfully, offering to help El seemed like the most logical thing to do, it had been his very first instinct when she had opened up to him about her situation.

Because, while El wasn't a full fledged party member, she was as good as, and when party members needed help, Mike was there to offer it as much as he could. Sure, this request was a little out there, but that didn't matter to him that much.

Especially because El is pretty much the prettiest girl he's ever seen in his life and if being her fake boyfriend is a service he can provide to her then he is definitely willing to do it.

"I just wanted to help you." He says with a small shrug, giving her a smile. El still looks a little unconvinced but she smiles back at him. "So, do you think we should figure out how exactly we're going to do this?"

El's face is unreadable for a second, and Mike feels his heart twist uncomfortably in his chest, but the moment passes quickly, El smiling and folding her hands in front of her. "Yes, I think that sounds like a good idea."

Before Mike has time to say anything in response, El is grabbing a notebook from her bag and opening it to a fresh page. Mike can only watch her, feeling his eyebrows creep up his forehead, an amused smile finding its way onto his lips. She must feel him looking at her, because she eyes him, only looking a little embarrassed.

"We need to make a list." She says, shrugging. "That way we know what we're doing." To emphasize her point, she clicks her pen, writing in big, bold lettering at the top of the page, "*The Rules.*"

"Rules?" Mike asks. "What exactly are we making a list for?" He had to be honest, when he agreed to help, he had no idea there were going to be rules involved, but El seemed pretty firm on the subject,

so he wasn't about to argue with her.

El sighed, pushing her hair behind her ears. She looked nervous again and Mike had to wonder if it was something he was doing that was making her so nervous or it was just the nature of the situation.

"I just think if maybe we had a set of rules, that way we would always know what we were doing and it would be easier for us to be convincing. That's all." She sounds more embarrassed now, like she suddenly thinks he's going to back out. He shakes his head quickly, in reassurance.

"No, yeah. That makes sense." He says. "Here, first rule is, we don't tell anyone that this is fake." For emphasis he adds. "That includes family."

El nods slowly, no doubt thinking about Will. "Yeah, I guess that's a good idea." She writes the idea down on the paper, numbering it. "But, we only act like a couple when we're at school.

Mike considers this for a second, before nodding in agreement. He's sure that they'll be times where they spend time at each other's houses, but his parents don't have to know that El is pretending to be his girlfriend or think that she's his real one.

"We should make sure we keep up the act all the time at school, though, even if none of our friends are around." Mike says. He doubts that anyone at school really cares about his dating life, so it's not like he thinks anyone would say anything about them, but easier to just cover their bases, just in case.

"That's a good idea." El says, writing it down quickly. "Sometimes I feel like Max has people watching me at school, she always talks to me about things that I do that I'm almost positive she wasn't around to see."

Mike laughed softly, nodding. He then paused, trying to think of ways that him and El could act at school so people would know they were together. What did couples even do at school? The only couple he was ever around was Max and Lucas and they just kind of made out all the time and Mike didn't think that was for him and El.

“So, what exactly should we *do* at school?” Mike asked. He was slightly embarrassed that he even had to ask and could feel his face warm.

El’s eyes widened slightly and she cleared her throat. “I actually don’t know.” She admitted. “I’ve never exactly had a boyfriend.”

For some reason, this surprised Mike. Sure, him and El were in the same friend group and he knew a lot about her because of Will, but he was surprised to hear she had never had a boyfriend before. El was one of the prettiest girls in the entire school, not to mention she was smart and nice. He’s pretty sure any guy would be crazy not to want to date El.

Now here he was, fake dating her.

“Well, I’ve never had a girlfriend before.” Mike said, shrugging slightly. He was pretty sure that nugget of information didn’t surprise anyone, El especially. Mike wasn’t exactly the kind of guy that girls wanted to date, it sucked sometimes, but he had come to accept it about himself a long time ago.

A look crossed El’s face, something that Mike couldn’t quite decipher. At first he thought it might have been sadness, but he figured that probably wasn’t the case. Pity was probably the actual emotion that she had felt, letting it pass before he could say anything about it.

They sat in semi awkward silence for a second, both of them no doubt thinking about how hard it might be to convince people they were in a relationship when neither one of them had ever actually been in one. Until Mike came up with an idea.

“My sister had a boyfriend for a while.”

El glanced at him, her eyebrow raised. “Nancy?”

Mike resisted the urge to snort and sarcastically quip *no, Holly, the seven year old* , but he knew that would probably be of no help to anyone so he nodded. “Yeah, she dated Steve Harrington for like a year and a half. I was still in middle school but I used to hear all the time about the stuff they did when she would talk to her friends on

the phone.”

El looked intrigued, scooting a little closer to him on the couch. “Like what?”

“Well, Nancy used to say that they held hands all the time, like whenever they were walking down the hallway.” El nodded, writing a note down on her piece of paper. “She also used to keep all kinds of notes that he would write her.”

“Notes?”

“Yeah, notes.” He thought back for a second, trying to remember what some of the notes had said when he had found them while looking for Nancy’s piggybank back when he was in middle school. “Some of them were just like, asking her to meet him to make out in the bathroom, but sometimes they would say stuff like ‘your hair looks pretty today’ or ‘I can’t wait to see you later’. Stuff like that.”

El smiles. “That sounds sweet.”

He’s not quite sure why, but Mike feels his heart flip in his chest, and he gulps. “I could write you notes, if you want. Give them to you at lunch, so Max sees.”

A softness comes across El’s features, a wide grin dancing across her lips. “You don’t have to do that.” She whispers, tucking her hair behind her ears.

“I want to.” Mike says. “Besides, it might be kind of fun to see Max’s reaction if I give them to you at lunch and you don’t let her read them.”

El laughed, dipping her head slightly, her hair falling over her face. Something deep within Mike wanted him to reach over and tuck her hair back for her, his hand even twitched on his leg, but he restrained himself, sitting up straighter.

“Also, we should start hanging out outside of school sometimes. We don’t have to keep the act up, but it’s not gonna be super convincing if the only time we’re ever around each other is at school.” Mike had to admit that part of this idea was just so he could get to know El a

little better. He was starting to realize that even though they had been in the same group for years, he barely knew anything about her.

El cheeks pinked at his words, but she wrote it down on her list anyway. "I also think that there shouldn't be any kissing." She said, biting her lip.

He didn't know why, but her words made his stomach twist. Was he really that bad of a kisser that she never wanted to kiss him again? Sure, she was literally the only girl he had ever kissed before, so he wasn't the most experienced guy, but he didn't think it had been that bad, all things considered. He wasn't going to argue with her though, the last thing he wanted to do was make her uncomfortable.

So he nodded. "Yeah, okay."

She looked relieved, making a note of it on the paper. "Oh, I should also tell you that the story I gave Max was that we started dating when you came over to Will and I's house during Thanksgiving break." Her lips are quirked off to side, almost like she's embarrassed, but Mike nods.

"Good to know. That means we've been secretly dating for like two weeks. That seems believable." Mike pauses, licking his lips. "How long do you think this is gonna last?"

Her face falls slightly and Mike *really* hopes she doesn't think he asked because he already wanted it to be over. He almost clarifies, but El opens her mouth before he can. "Well, just long enough that after we 'break up', Max will leave me alone for at least a little while so I can properly deal with my heartbreak, so to say."

Mike nods, allowing a silence to fall over them. This silence isn't much more comfortable than the earlier ones, but feels different somehow. Mike can't put his finger on why. He sneaks a glance at El, who's absentmindedly doodling in the corner of her paper.

"So, we can't tell anyone we're not really dating, we hold hands at school and that's when we act like couple." Mike says, trying to remember all the points they decided on. "I'll write you notes, and give them to you at lunch. Also, we start hanging out sometimes

outside of school, but that's just as friends."

"And no kissing." El reminds him, raising her eyebrow.

"Right. No kissing."

For a moment, Mike thinks back to their kiss in the hallway. How even though it had surprised him, it still had made his heart beat wildly in his chest. How he had been kind of disappointed when it had ended. But he shakes the memory away, swallowing sharply.

If El didn't want to kiss him, then they weren't going to kiss, simple as that.

Then, El did something that Mike would have never been able to predict, even more so than her kiss earlier today. She held out her hand, waiting for him to shake. He had to hold back laughter, but he reached out and connected their hands.

With their hands connected, El gave him a small smile, looking pleased with their agreement. Mike smiled back, doing a bad job of ignoring the way his heart fluttered at the contact of their hands.

And when he caught a glance of her smile again, all he could think about was how he wanted to kiss her again.

God, he was probably going to regret this.

Later that night, El lay on her back, staring up at the ceiling with only one thought running through her head.

Why the hell had she shaken his hand?

God, he probably thought she was a total weirdo now, ending a conversation like that with a handshake, but it was the only thing El could think of doing. It was the same reason she had made the no kissing rule. The less physical contact her and Mike make, the easier

it will be for her to remind herself that none of this is real.

If she kissed him again, she just might start thinking that none of it was fake.

She was interrupted in her self pity by a knock on her door. Without saying anything in response, the door opened and El covered her face with her pillow, not ready to face who was on the other side.

“Did you really make out with Mike in the hallway today?” Her step brother asked, and while El couldn’t see his face, she imagined it was twisted in a combination of confusion and disgust. “And are you guys actually dating?”

El groaned quietly, letting the sound get muffled by the pillow. She knew she wouldn’t have been able to avoid this questions from Will, she was honestly surprised she had avoided them thus far, but she had gotten home just as dinner was being served and luckily her brother had the decency not to ask her about it in front of their parents.

Removing the pillow, she nodded her head. “Yes, to both.”

Turning on her bed, she saw Will’s eyes widen, his eyebrows disappearing under his hair. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

He sounded confused still, this time twinges of hurt evident in her tone and El cursed herself for doing this. Her and Will hardly *ever* lied to each other, so it was probably killing him that she hadn’t told him that not only did she have a boyfriend, but that said boyfriend was one of his best friends.

“I’m sorry, Will. We didn’t tell anyone.” She lied, biting her lip. “We were gonna explain everything to you guys tomorrow, I promise.”

While Will still looked a little hurt, he gave a small smile. “Alright, you promise.”

She nodded. “I swear on my life.” The siblings shared a small smile and El could see the hurt melt away from his features, joy lighting up his eyes.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’m happy for you. You and Mike make a good match.” With that, he gave her another smile, backing away and disappearing down the hallway.

Throwing herself back down on her bed, El thought about what Will had said. Her and Mike made a good match? How?

Mike was cute, smart, funny, kind, the perfect package. She was just El, she did alright in school, but not amazing, Dustin was the only person who thought she was funny and she doubted she was half a bit as cute as Mike was. Maybe Will was just saying that because she’s his sister and Mike is his best friend.

She ignores the voice in the very back of her head telling her that Will never tells a lie.

El shivered in the cold November morning breeze, tightening her jacket around her body. Her stomach was in knots, she was so nervous. She was waiting for Mike and with every passing second she became more and more nervous.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, but was probably no more than five minutes, his car pulled into the parking lot, parking a couple spots down from where El was standing. She breathed a small sigh of relief, but the sight of him did little to relieve the ever growing pit in her stomach, if anything, seeing him just made it worse.

“Hey.” He said as he approached her, smiling. El licked her lips, trying her best to look composed and not like she felt like her entire body was about to explode. *God* he looked even cuter today than he had yesterday. He was wearing a dark red sweater, the black collar of his shirt peeking out around his neck. It made her want to absolutely *die* how adorable he looked.

“El, you ready?” Mike asked, his eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. Clearly she taken too long being distracted by his cuteness

to answer him. She could feel her cheeks beginning to redden, but hoped that Mike wouldn't notice.

"Yeah, let's go." She says, a small, nervous smile coming onto her face. Mike returns her grin, reaching out and grabbing her hand with his own, giving it a small squeeze. She ignores the chill that runs down her spine, playing it off as the bitter chill in the air making her shiver.

El was hyper aware of the weight of Mike's hand in her own, and the way it felt to walk down the hallway hand in hand with him. There were butterflies in her stomach and with every passing second, and with every step she took, she felt her heart skip in her chest.

People were watching them as they walked together, but not with nearly as much interest as they had when she had kissed him yesterday. El thought she saw Max's flash of red hair out of the corner of her eye as her and Mike made the way to his locker, but when she blinked, it was gone.

"Hey, so I was thinking." Mike said when they stopped at his locker. He licked his lips and El's stomach flipped. "Maybe I could give you a ride to school tomorrow. You looked kinda cold waiting outside, might be easier." He shrugs like it's no big deal when in fact that's not the case at all.

"Mike, I live totally out of the way from you." She says, remembering how long it had taken her to get home the night before. Mike had offered to give her a ride, but she had refused, needing time alone to think about what had just happened. "It would add at least fifteen minutes to your morning, I don't mind waiting."

El can tell that Mike is resisting the urge to roll his eyes, and her stomach turns. "El, it's fine. My mom is always getting mad that I don't leave the house early enough anyway, so now I'll have a reason to try and get out of the house on time."

"Okay, if you really don't mind."

"Not at all." Mike says with a small smile. "Besides, Will gets a ride to school early anyway right? So it would save at least one of your

parents from having to make the drive, right?”

El nodded. Will had been coming to school early for art club meetings and helping painting the set for the holiday musical for a couple of weeks now. Usually Joyce brought him on her way to work and El would catch a ride with her dad later, but lately her dad had been asking her if she wouldn't mind riding with Joyce in the mornings so he could get the station earlier, so it probably would help her dad out if she could catch a ride with Mike in the morning.

“Yeah, it would. Thanks.”

“It's no big deal, besides it's what boyfriends do, right?” He winked, sending an excited shiver down her spine.

She let out a forced laugh, the noise coming out like more of a choking sound than a laugh, but luckily Mike didn't notice, too busy removing his books from his locker. “On the subject of Will, though.” Mike turned to look at her, confusion started to etch itself into his features. “He was pretty upset last night, when he realized I never told him anything, so I promised we would tell everyone at lunch today.”

Mike nods, she can see the similar flash of hurt she felt last night flash across his face. She knew that Will and his friends didn't usually lie to each other, *friends don't lie*, even she knew that. “Yeah, I kind of figured we would have to, Dustin called me on my walkie like six times last night asking if it was true.”

El snorts, unable to hold in her amusement. She can only imagine Dustin continuously trying to radio Mike, practically annoying the living hell out of him to get him to talk. “So, we'll tell them at lunch. Everything.” She widens her eyes, hoping he reads between the lines.

“Yeah. Everything.” He gives her a smile, reaching over and squeezing her hand. She wonders if it's for show, or if it's genuine. *God of course it's for show, they're still in school and there are people around.*

The bell rings, pulling them from their conversation. Mike's hand leaves hers and El misses it immediately. He closes his locker and

gives her a grin.

“Well, I’ll see you later.” He says. El nods, opening her mouth to answer when Mike leans down suddenly and presses a kiss to her cheek. He smirks and turns to walk away from her before she has a chance to even gather her thoughts.

Watching him walk away from her down the hallway she practically hears the *thump thump thumping* of her heart against her ribcage.

She swears it sounds just like a love song she heard once.

As soon as Mike is sitting in his first class he regrets kissing El on the cheek.

It had all been so instinctual, they had been acting so much like boyfriend and girlfriend, all he could think of doing was leaning down and kissing her cheek. He hadn’t even remembered her no kissing rule until he had been around the corner, and all he had wanted to do was kick himself for being such an idiot.

He probably had ruined everything and they was hardly anything for him to ruin yet.

El had literally asked that they not kiss, she had put it right there in the rules. In fact it was one of the only rules that they had established. God, he was such a wastoid.

Throwing his head down on his desk, he barely listened to his first class’s lecture. It was his chemistry class and Mike had an A, so he was pretty sure it wouldn’t be the end of the world if he didn’t pay attention just this once. Instead, he spent the whole period wondering how El was going to tell him later that he was a horrible person and she never wanted to speak to him again.

God, he was worst person alive.

Him and El didn't have British Lit that day, so Mike knew he wasn't going to see her again until lunch, so in his third period class, he decided to write her a note. That was also one of their rules, and Mike hoped at least that if he wrote her a note, she would actually read it. He wasn't so sure that if he tried to talk to her, that she would listen.

It takes him almost the entire period to write his note, but when he's slipping it through the cracks in her locker later he feels confident that he got his point across. The note isn't all that long, and it's covered in eraser marks and smudged pencil where he decided to change his words or rewrite his sentences. While he's confident, there's a twinge of nerves as the note official leaves his possession. The ball is now in El's court.

He can only hope that she won't 'break up' with him at lunch before they can even talk to their friends.

El would be lying if she said she hadn't dreamed about this moment before.

Granted in her dreams, it was real and not an overly fabricated lie in order to get her best friend to stop setting her up with people, but that's besides the point. Either way, she had had *countless* dreams about telling her friends that she was dating Mike, hell she had had upwards of hundreds of dreams, about dating him, but for some reason this moment *always* played a focal point in her dreams.

And now it was happening. And she was nervous. Even if absolutely none of it was real.

"So, I heard about you and Wheeler this morning." Max says suddenly, surprising El by her locker. El had been grabbing her lunch and getting ready to walk to the quad. Her and Mike hadn't made any kind of plan to meet before telling their friends, but she hoped they could talk for a second before they did.

“What exactly did you hear?” El asks. She pops her locker open, eyebrows furrowing together, confused, when a piece of paper falls to her feet. *El*, the folded up note says, accompanied by a small heart. Her own heart dances in her chest.

“Only that you and Mike were adorably and disgustingly attached at the hip as you came into school today. Also that he kissed you.” Max said, shrugging as she crossed her arms over her chest. El froze.

She had been thinking about that kiss all morning. Sure, it had just been a kiss on the cheek, but Mike had still pressed his lips against her skin and it made her entire body feel like it was going to explode. When he pressed his lips against her cheek, she had completely forgotten why she had enforced the no kissing rule.

“He kissed me on the cheek.” El said as she picked up the paper from the ground. Mike’s handwriting was recognizable immediately and she smiled.

“A kiss is still a kiss.” Max said. “What’s that?” She tried to look over El’s shoulder at the note, attempting to grab it from her hands while she was at it, but El stuffed the note in her pocket.

“It’s none of your business.” She huffs, straightening her spine. Max has the audacity to look offended, opening her mouth before shutting it again.

Realizing that most of the hallway had cleared and if they didn’t move now, they would miss lunch, El closed her locker and started walking towards the quad, Max hot on her heels.

“Are you and Wheeler writing each other love letters?” There was a weird hint of disbelief in Max’s voice and El knew if she turned around and looked at her friend, her face would match her tone of voice, so El just shrugged.

“Maybe.” She said, unable to resist a smile taking over her face. Max wasn’t able to see her, but it still made her smile, thinking about how Mike was writing her notes. Even if they weren’t the sickening and *oh so adorable* love notes that Max thought that they were.

“Ew.” Max said simply, making gagging noises. El turned around to glare at her best friend, who merely chuckled. “Oh speak of the devil, hey loverboy.” Max said, tipping her chin.

Confused, El turned around, and luckily just in time to avoid running directly into Mike who was looking at the two of them. He had an unreadable expression on his face and El’s heart thumped, nervously.

“Could you give us a second, Max?” El asks. She can tell Max doesn’t want to, by the way she sighs, but she also nods, smirking.

“Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” With those words, she winks before turning around and disappearing in the direction of the picnic tables that the party frequently sat at. El felt her face redden as she watched Max walk away, her best friend’s words causing her stomach to flip.

“Did you get my note?” Mike asked, his voice low and quiet. He looked concerned, like he was afraid that she hadn’t gotten it, like it had gotten lost or she had thrown it away.

She nodded, pulling it from her pocket. “I haven’t gotten a chance to read it yet, though. Max was kind of breathing down my neck and I didn’t want her to see.”

Mike sighed, rubbing his hand through his hair. “Well, to sum it up, the note just says that I’m sorry. About this morning.”

El looks down at the note in her hand and then back at Mike. “What are you sorry about?” She thinks about what happened this morning, was he apologizing about holding her hand? Offering her a ride?

Was he apologizing for *kissing* her?

“For kissing you.” El’s heart speeds up in her chest. Her stomach twists uncomfortably. “I know it was just on the cheek, but you specifically asked that we not kiss and I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable or anything and I just -”

El’s heart swelled in her chest. “Mike.” He stopped, biting his lower lip. “It’s ok.”

“Are you sure? I just don’t want to do anything that’s gonna make you uncomfortable.” He says. El smiles, falling for him all the more. *God*, could he be any more perfect and adorable. For a second, all she can do is look at him, letting her heart dance in her chest.

“Yeah, I’m sure.” She finally says. Mike smiles, clearly relieved. “We should probably get to the table, lunch is already half over.” As much as she definitely *doesn’t* want this moment to end, and to be painfully reminded that their relationship is merely for show, she knows the longer they avoid their friends, the more teasing they’ll have to endure.

“You’re right. Besides, we still need to tell them our story.” Mike teases, reaching down to grab her hand. The feeling of his palm against hers surprises her and his words drive a wedge into her heart, but she nods, following him as he leads them towards the table where they’re friends are sitting.

“I KNEW IT!” Dustin exclaims as soon as the two are in earshot, punching Lucas on the arm. Lucas glares at him, throwing his hands up. Dustin promptly ignore him, instead focusing on El and Mike in front of him. “I knew that the two of you were together.”

“You and the rest of Hawkins High.” Max says. “They kind of made out in front of everyone yesterday and were acting all gross this morning. I think everyone has figured it out at this point.”

El sneaks a glance at Mike who, for what it was worth, was looking annoyed by both Dustin and Max’s comments. He gives her hand a light squeeze, and it makes sends a tingle up and down her spine. “Yeah, we are.” Mike says after a moment, a small shrug lifting his shoulders.

Together the two of them sit down at the table, next to Will and across from Dustin, Lucas and Max. Dustin looks like he’s about to burst with excitement, a wide grin on his face, while Max and Lucas look amused. Will is also smiling at them, but El can tell that his is more of a genuine happiness for El and Mike than it is anything else.

The whole thing makes her heart ache in her chest.

“So, when the hell did it happen?” Lucas finally asks, breaking the silence. El takes a deep breath, and she can feel her palm becoming sweaty in Mike’s grip.

“Thanksgiving.” Mike says, flashing her a quick smile. “I went over to Will’s house one day and El and I started talking and it just kind of happened.” As if he’s trying to prove his point, Mike lifts their joined hands up and places them gently on the table, giving her a smile. El feels her mouth go dry.

She sees her friends looking at her and she nods. “Yeah, there was nothing big about it. I honestly never saw it coming.” El says, her heart catching in her throat. There’s a weird tug inside of her that she doesn’t know how to describe and she feels her hand go limp in Mike’s.

“I didn’t see it coming, but I’m really happy it happened.” Mike said, his voice soft. El, who was looking at her and Mike’s interlocked hands, raises her eyes to look at him. What she doesn’t expect is for Mike to be looking at her, his eyes soft and a small grin on his face.

Every single molecule inside of her feels like it’s on fire.

“If it happened back over Thanksgiving break, why did you guys not tell anyone?” Lucas asks, his eyebrows raised. El opens her mouth to answer, but Mike beats her too it.

“Well, we realized that it was something really special and wanted to just keep it between us for a while.” He shrugs, like it’s the simplest thing in the world. “We wanted to make sure that what we were feeling was real and special and when we realized it was, we figured it was time to just be open about it.”

El is certain that she’s dreaming. That she’s going to pinch herself and realize that none of this is actually happening. Because even though Mike’s words are meaningless (*and god does it make her heart hurt to remind herself of such*), they’re the most romantic words anyone has ever spoken about her.

She’s so caught up in absorbing his words that she doesn’t even notice the small smiles of her friends around them. She hardly can

feel Mike's hand in hers anymore because she's too busy living in the daydream where Mike really meant what he said. Where all the glances and the hand squeezing and the soft smiles are because he just wants to look at her and be around her, not because they're putting on a show for their friends.

The bell rings, loudly, effectively ending her daydream.

Mike's hand now feels cold, and heavy in hers, as the reality of the situation sinks in around her. He's not looking at her now, too busy grabbing his backpack from the ground and shouldering it. Will bumps her hip with his own, smiling when she looks at him.

"You guys are cute." He says, his smile morphing into a small smirk. El does her best to roll her eyes, ignoring the heavy weight in her stomach. Mike only snorts behind her, and El knows without turning around that Mike's expression is probably similar to her own.

El watches as Will, and the rest of their friends, disappear into the crowd of students going to class. Her mouth is dry suddenly as she's left alone with Mike, their hands still limply connecting. The last thing El wants to do is break that connection, but she knows she's going to have to eventually.

"Well, that went well." Mike says once all their friends are out of sight. El laughs, despite herself. Their hands fall apart then, the magical bubble that El had been living in, popping and dissolving around her in a cloud of smoke.

"Yeah. Definitely."

"I think they really believed us." El turns her head to look at him, getting momentarily distracted by the way the slight breeze was messing up his hair, the ends curling around him like a dark brown halo. "I gotta go, but I'll see you later."

El's mouth goes dry, from what she can't be quite sure, maybe just being in Mike's presence alone, the last fifteen minutes still running on a loop in her head, and she can't find any words so she simply nods.

With another small smile at her, Mike taps her gently on the arm before making his way back towards the school. She envies how comfortable and casual he manages to look while doing so. While all she can think about is how she wishes she was still holding his hand.

“Hey dad. I just wanted to tell you that you don’t need to give me a ride to school tomorrow.”

Jim Hopper, aforementioned dad, had been in the middle of scooping a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth when El decided to make her announcement. He paused, the fork hovering near his moustache before he frowned, setting his utensil back on his place.

“And why might that be? You plan on playing hooky tomorrow?” El knows her dad is teasing, she’s never missed a day of school in live sans getting chicken pox when she was ten, but she still rolls her eyes.

“No, someone at school offered to give me a ride.” She says with a small shrug. El knows better than to think her dad won’t question her further, he was a cop for crying out loud, but she can hope that he won’t grill her too much.

“Someone? Someone who?” El can see Joyce across from her trying not to laugh, and she huffs, crossing her arms across her chest.

“Her boyfriend.”

El feels her eyes go wide as she drops her fork to her plate, the metal clanging against the ceramic. She rotates her head to glare at her step brother, who’s smirking at her as he takes a sip of his water.

“Boyfriend? Since when the hell do you have a boyfriend?” Her dad doesn’t sound mad, which makes her feel better, butt here’s a twinge of hurt laced in his voice. It makes El’s heart squeeze uncomfortably in her chest.

Ever since she was a little girl, she's always told her dad everything. Even things that were hard and uncomfortable. It was one of the major things her dad had always instilled in her, to talk about things and not keep secrets, even if they were hard.

"I - uh - since Thanksgiving." El mutters, looking down at her lap, trying to ignore the blush of embarrassment and shame that was creeping up her neck and warming her skin. She didn't want to look at her dad. She knew if she looked at him, she would blow everything.

There was a beat of silence amongst the Byers-Hopper family and El felt like she was going to vomit.

"Do we know this boy, El?" Joyce finally asked, a small, motherly smile on her face when El lifted her eyes up to her family.

She nodded, swallowing roughly, looking at her dad, who hadn't moved since she last looked at him. "It's Mike. Mike Wheeler." El says, grateful that her voice doesn't waver. Joyce smiles at this, clasping her hands together in front of her.

"Oh, what a sweet boy." Joyce coos, causing Will to snort. She waves her hand at her son and El cracks a small smile. "You like Mike, don't you Hop?"

El's father, who had adjusted in his seat to put his chin in his hands, strokes his chin. At first he doesn't say anything and El gulps, a nervous shudder running down her spine. Joyce slaps him on the arm, causing him to flinch as a reflex.

"Will's friend, Mike? Tall, nerdy, talks way too much?" El rolls her eyes and Joyce slaps him again, gasping.

"That's the one!" Will exclaims, pointing across the table at his stepfather, who smirks at him in return. "Him and El are quite the sight to see" This time it's El's turn to reach over and smack Will, but unlike her father, he has the reflexes to move his arm out of her reach before she can make contact.

Her dad, who still looked like he was trying to process all the

information he had received in the last ten minutes glanced over in her direction, his lips pursed. "So, let me get this all straight. You and the Wheeler kid have been dating since Thanksgiving and we're all now just finding out about it, and he's picking you up for school tomorrow."

El flinches, biting her lip. "Yeah." Sweat is collecting at the base of her spine, making her shirt to stick to her lower back, and she shifts uncomfortably in her seat. "Sorry I didn't tell you sooner."

"If it makes you feel any better, no one knew until El made out with him in the hallway yesterday."

El loves her stepbrother, she really does. In fact she would go as far as to say that he's probably her favorite person in the entire world, but at this moment in time, all she wants to do is reach over and strangle him.

For what it's worth, even through her now bright red face and the amused, but still slightly surprised look on Joyce's face, her dad doesn't say anything. At least not about the *news* that Will felt was necessary to admit to the entire dinner table.

Instead, he stands from the table, wiping his face with his napkin, sighing. "I need a drink." With that, he places his napkin on his plate, picks up his plate and exits the dining room. El swears she doesn't breathe until he's gone.

"So, is Mike a good kisser?" Joyce asks as soon as El's dad is out of sight. El breathes in so hard that she almost chokes on her own saliva.

"Mom!" Will says. "That's so gross."

El's able to tune them out after that, the conversation between mother and son soon shifts from El and Mike to Joyce embarrassing Will, something that El swears they talk about every month these days.

El's dad never comes back to the table.

She spends the rest of the night expecting him to come and knock on

her door, but it never comes. So, instead she listens to her walkman and ignores Will when he tries to get her attention, still annoyed that he spilled about her and Mike.

Mike flits in and out of her thoughts. She thinks of the way his lips felt on her cheek, the way her entire body exploded when he held her hand, the way he seemed genuinely sorry for breaking of her rules. But mainly, she thinks about the harsh reminder she had gotten when he had dropped her hand and walked away from her.

By morning, El's stomach and sour and she doesn't want to get out of bed.

Luckily, but also unluckily, El's dad gets called into work before Mike gets to their house in the morning. Joyce and Will have just walked out the door when the police radio crackles to life in the corner of the living room, signifying a car break in at the local Big Buy. He had to rush out the door after that, merely giving El a gruff kiss on the top of the head instead of talking to her like she knew he wanted to.

She felt lucky because she knew her dad would follow her outside to say something to Mike when he came to pick her up. Granted her dad and Mike had met before, Mike had been over to the Byers-Hopper house more than once in the three plus years since her dad and Joyce had gotten married, but that was always as Will's friend, not as El's boyfriend.

It was unlucky though, because now El was left to wait by herself. As the minutes ticked on she got increasingly more antsy, pacing across the living room and wandering in and out of the kitchen. Her and Mike hadn't even decided on a time, so she had no idea what time he was going to be coming to get her. This also meant that now she had to worry about the kind of conversation her and her dad would be having later.

She knew he wasn't mad, her dad didn't get mad at her, no, he wasn't mad, he was upset. He was upset that El hadn't told him about something important in her life. That was way worse then mad.

Especially when it wasn't even a real important thing to begin with.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours of pacing on El's part, there was a honking outside. Exiting her house as quickly as she could without looking like a lunatic, she smiled when she saw Mike's car outside waiting for her. It looked like Mike was talking to someone in the car and she furrowed her eyebrows together.

Shrugging it off, she made her way down the walk and got in the passenger seat. "Hey, thanks for the ride." She said, slightly breathless from the cold morning air that had filled her lungs.

"Hey." Mike says with a grin on his face, putting the car in reverse. "Oh El, this is my sister Holly." He said, gesturing into the backseat.

Turning around, El was brought face to face with a girl, who probably wasn't a day over seven, with long blonde hair tied up in pigtails. She was staring at El, a look of curiosity, mixed with something that El definitely thought was judgement.

"Are you Mike's girlfriend?" She asked, leaning forward and putting her chin in her hands.

"Holly," Mike said, looking exasperated as he glanced at her in the rearview mirror, rolling his eyes, "that's none of your business." Mike's words made El shift uncomfortably in her seat, not that they had any reason to. It made sense that Mike didn't want to relinquish the information to his sister, but it still made her stomach twist.

She has to remind herself that she's not she's actually Mike's girlfriend. He's not denying anything real, if anything he's probably just not telling her so he has less to explain to her when they "break up" eventually.

Holly doesn't seem pleased by his answer, but based on the glare Mike gives her in the mirror and Holly's loud, dramatic sigh, the conversation seems over. The car ride is relatively silent after that, Mike offers to let her control the music and heat, but El is afraid to touch anything, nervous she'll do something wrong.

Before El knows it, they're pulling into the high school parking lot, Holly dropped off at the elementary school across the street and Mike is turning to talk to her.

"I'm sorry about that." He says, pushing his hair back from his face. The sight makes El's heart swell. "With Holly. I just didn't want to say anything to her because she's such a blabbermouth around my mom and I haven't told her yet..." He trails off and El nods.

"Mike, I get it." She says, giving him a small smile. "Besides, it's not like I'm actually your girlfriend." He snorts and her heart squeezes painfully in her chest even though she knows it shouldn't. She should be used to this by now.

"Still, I didn't think we were gonna lie to our families about it, I just didn't want Holly to tell my mom." He sighs, rubbing his hands against his brown corduroys. Her favorites.

El smiles. "Mike, really it's fine. I totally understand." She giggles, despite herself. "In fact, Will did that exact thing to me last night, totally blabbed to my parents about it."

Mike's eyes widen to an almost comical size and his mouth hangs open in disbelief. El has to resist the urge to laugh. She can tell by the look on his face that his mind is flashing to her police chief father, who, for what it's worth, is all talk when it comes to how he feels about his daughter and boys.

"What did, uh, what did they say?" Mike finally asks, clearing his throat. There are students moving around outside the car, and taking a look at the dashboard clock, they only have a couple more minutes before the bell.

She shrugs, "Not much. My dad seemed surprised but that's I think just because he didn't hear it from me." She sighs. "Joyce was happy though." Her words come out sadder than she intended, as she thinks back to the way her Joyce's eyes had lit up at El's news, and how sad she was going to be when El broke the news to her in a couple of weeks that it was over.

Mike nods, although he still looks nervous, his knee bouncing and his adam's apple bobbing in his throat. "He wasn't mad though, your dad?"

El shook her head, swallowing the weird lump in her throat. "No."

Mike's leg is still shaking but his face is more relaxed now, his gaze drifting from the windshield to her and back again. "Besides, even if he was. We're just pretending, right?"

The words burn her throat as she speaks them, and she can't look at Mike as they fall from her lips. Instead, she gets out of the car, leaning against the door, waiting for him. Not for the first time, El wonders why she did this to herself, why she set herself up to be heartbroken.

Mike exits the car behind her and she turns, her heart jumping into her throat and she knows exactly why she decided to do this.

Because she knows it's never going to be real and she would rather have some sort of feeling of what it's like to be with him, then never know at all. And at least because it's fake, she won't feel like she lost him when it's over.

By Friday, Mike thinks he has a pretty good handle on this whole 'being El's fake boyfriend thing.'

He picks her up for school everyday, and everyday Holly asks if she's his girlfriend (and everyday Mike refuses to answer, still not having admitted anything to his mother). They walk down the hallways together, hold hands, they hug sometimes. He writes her notes, none of them overly fancy, just quips about how a joke she said was funny or about how good her presentation in British Lit was.

On Friday he decides to tell her that she looks pretty.

She's wearing a navy blue dress that makes her eyes shine and her skin look extra soft. Mike has always, *always*, thought that El was pretty, beautiful even, but Friday she was glowing and it made Mike's heart threaten to beat out of his chest when he looked at her.

He passes her the note in British Lit, where he now sits on seat in front of her, instead of three (the first day they walked in together,

Melanie Palmer, who usually sat in front of El, had taken Mike's seat, leaving him to take hers), and his stomach swoops when he glances back to see her grinning sheepishly and a blush crossing her cheeks.

By Friday afternoon, he realizes he has a crush on her.

He knows it sounds dumb, he has a crush on his fake girlfriend whose only fake dating him for convenience, but he can't help it. El is beautiful, smart, way funnier than he initially realized and also insanely not interested in him and way out of his league.

It all hits him like a crashing ocean wave when him and El are standing outside after the final bell. Their hands are interlocked, casually, because there are still plenty of their classmates around and Mike's heart is beating so much he can feel it in the tips of his toes.

"Hey, are you doing anything tonight?" He asks, breaking their casual, comfortable silence. El looks up from the ground, where she had been tracing patterns in the dirt with her foot and cocks her head. "We haven't really hung out at all this week, and it's the weekend so..." Mike trails off, feeling an embarrassed blush creep across his shoulders and collarbone.

"Oh.." El says, seeming to understand what he getting at. The agreement, the *rules*. "I'm actually busy tonight, sleepover with Max." Mike nods, cursing at himself for asking. He knew that El and Max had a sleepover every Friday night, El had told him more than once and he had heard them talk about it at lunch before. "But, I don't think I'm busy tomorrow."

Mike is only partly ashamed to admit that heartbeat picks up in his chest when she tells him that and he grins. "Ok, do you wanna hang out then?" El considers this and then nods, smiling. "Ok, cool."

"Cool." She repeats, smiling again before looking back down at the ground. Mike probably imagines this but he swears he feels her grip on his fingers increase, almost like a squeeze.

"Oh! There you guys are!" Will says, appearing in front of them. El snaps her head up from her feet, giving Will a grin. "Thanks for waiting."

Mike shrugs, “Yeah don’t worry about it, you and El live together so it’s really not a big deal.” The three of them make their way to Mike’s car, Will immediately getting in the back so El can sit in the front. This makes Mike smile and for the entire car ride from school to Will and El’s house he lets himself imagine that it’s real.

Later that night, Mike is lying in bed, trying to forget about his mom’s reaction to finding out he had a (fake, not that she knew) girlfriend. Holly had been smirking at him across the table throughout almost all of dinner that Mike knew he wouldn’t be able to keep her quiet much longer.

She had been happy, as any mother would be, he supposed, a smile and a “*that’s great, sweetie*” as she sipped her wine and munched on her green beans. But he could tell that she was upset that he had kept it from her for so long, just like El’s dad had been. He stayed strong though, giving his mom the same story him and El had given their friends.

“Bring her over for dinner tomorrow night, Michael. I want to meet this lovely girl.” His mom had said as he had tried to escape after helping with the dishes. Mike didn’t have the heart to tell his mom that she had met El before, so he nodded, knowing there was absolutely no way he was going to get out of it.

So it looked like El was coming over for dinner tomorrow.

If only know he knew how to break the news to her. He didn’t want to call her now, she was in the middle of a sleepover with Max and he didn’t want to bring down her mood by telling her she was forced to spend the next night with his mom and his sister. He decided he would tell her in the morning, they already planned to spend time together anyway, so maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

All he knew is that he *really* wanted his mom to like El.

Even though El wasn’t actually his girlfriend, she was still really awesome and her and Mike were friends, at least he hoped at this point they were. So yeah, he really wanted his mom to like El, even if her being his girlfriend was strictly for show.

A knock on the door interrupts his thoughts and when he sits up on his bed, Holly has pushed the door ajar and is standing in the doorway with a smile on her face.

“What’s up Holls?” He asks, pushing himself into a full sitting position.

“I’m really glad that El is your girlfriend.” She says, and Mike’s heart tap dances in his chest. “She’s way prettier than you, but I like her.”

Mike does his best to look offended at his little sister’s words, but he has to agree with her. El is like *way* prettier than he is. “I like her too, Holls.” He admits, giving his sister a smile.

And unlike the rest of his relationship with El, that part’s not a lie.

Holly smirks at him before disappearing from his room without another word and Mike sighs before throwing himself back on his bed. He thinks about his sister’s words and how much it really *sucks* that none of it is real. But he supposes he’ll get over it.

His thoughts quickly shift from what Holly said about El to El herself. He thinks about how she had smiled at him at lunch today when he had grabbed an extra chocolate bar from the vending machine for her. How it had made his heartbeat quicken had warmth fill his entire body.

He thinks about how every molecule in his body explodes when she holds his hand, and how cold he feels whenever he has to let go. He thinks about how much it brings a smile to his face when he sees her reading one of his notes and how he always tries to make sure it’s perfect before slipping it into the cracks in her locker.

God it’s only been four days and he wants to do this forever.

The realization hits him like a school bus, or like the impact of hitting the ground after jumping off a cliff.

He was in love with his fake girlfriend.

Notes for the Chapter:

dun dun dun. so uh..that all happened. hopefully you guys enjoyed! the next chapter is gonna be a Wild Ride and i hope you guys are all ready for that. there's gonna be angst and there's gonna be pain next time around so, prepare yourselves.

let me know what you guys thought! i love you all so much!

also feel free to go over to tumblr and yell at me there, my url is [finnwolfhards](#) and i encourage all yelling.

3. Chapter 3

Notes for the Chapter:

i'm sorry?

Realizing that he was in love with El went a little like this.

Step one, freak out.

Step two, overthink.

Step three, acceptance.

Mike went through all three steps in the course of about two and a half minutes and by the time he had whizzed through his freak out, that included shaky fingers, bouncing legs and countless hairs pulled by how much his hands were running across his scalp, allowed his mind to run at a mile a minute as he thought about every single interaction him and El had ever had before, he was tired.

The acceptance part kind of just happened. After sitting on the edge of his bed, picking at his fingernails as the last week ran through his head like a marathon sprinter, he could feel himself smiling and his heart bursting in his chest.

He was in love with El.

Sure, she was his fake girlfriend and she was probably never going to feel the same way about him as he did about her, she was gorgeous and funny and smart and kind and pretty much perfect and he was absolutely none of those things, but it felt nice to finally understand why he felt the way he did whenever he was around her.

At first he had thought maybe he was just nervous, that's why his heart would speed up and his palms would sweat. It seemed like a reasonable explanation, him and El, while not unfamiliar with each other, had never spent that much time together, especially in any capacity like that. Then maybe he thought that maybe he was on edge, scared that he would say something or do something to mess this up for El. He figured that whenever he was around her, his

stomach would flip and adrenaline would pump through his veins because he was scared to do something wrong.

But love, that he hadn't seen coming. It made perfect sense though.

Love . He was in love with El. How he had not figured it out sooner? Had he always been in love with her? Was it something that had been buried and hidden deep within him, only making an appearance when he now had a reason to realize it? Or was it new, something sprung up and growing with every passing day as him and El's fake relationship dug deeper and deeper?

He didn't know the answer to any of those questions. But he did know one thing.

El was never going to be able to find out.

The last thing that Mike wanted to do was ruin everything by El finding out that he was in love with her. God, she would probably think he was such a loser. Just her brother's loser best friend who couldn't understand that fake relationships meant that none of it was real. Mike didn't have too much experience in the fake dating world (hell, he had four days and he had already failed) but he did know that rule number one was, don't fall in love with your fake girlfriend.

(he ignored the tiny voice in his head telling him that rules were meant to be broken.)

Later that night, with the sun long gone and the moon high in the sky, Mike lay awake, still thinking about El.

It wasn't the first night that Mike was awake thinking about her, it had been happening all week but now, now it was different. Now, merely thinking about the way she smiled at him, or the way her hand felt in his made his heart practically burst from his chest. Before it had been a light skip against his ribcage, now it was a steady drum beat that was akin to a thunderstorm.

When sleep finally threatened to overtake him, the emotional realization of the evening taking more out of him than expected, he could only hope that he would dream about El. He wanted to dream

about them holding hands and kissing for real, not for show.

He wanted to dream it because he knew that dreamland is the only place where it would ever be true.

El was nervous. No, that was an understatement. El was terrified.

Standing in front of her full length mirror, running her hand across the hem of her dress, her stomach was in knots as she worried about the evening ahead. Sure, she had met Mike's mom before, but only in passing, never in a formal, being invited over for dinner, kind of setting. Meaning she has absolutely no idea what to expect and she's afraid she's going to screw everything up.

She knows she shouldn't be too worried, her and Mike weren't even actually dating. This was just a formality to keep the act up, besides his mom would probably hate her soon enough anyway when her and Mike "break up" for breaking Mike's heart. She still wanted Mrs. Wheeler to like her though.

Not because she would ever actually be Mike's girlfriend but because you know, El wanted people to like her.

"You look nice." A voice said from the doorway, snapping El from her train of thought. Looking in the mirror, she saw her dad behind her, a small smile on his face.

"Yes well, I'm off to meet the family." She joked, shaking her head. Despite it having been a couple days since the news was dropped to her dad about her and Mike, they hadn't really had too much of a chance to talk about it.

Her dad nodded, stepping into the room and coming up behind her in the mirror. "Just Karen though, right?" Hopper had a look of disdain on his face and El almost laughed at the sight. She had heard many times about how much Hopper disliked Mike's dad, mainly during the times where Mike would spend the night because he'd had a fight

with his dad or his parents were fighting, but that hadn't happened in almost a year.

"Yeah." El said, taking a deep breath. "It's just him, his mom and Holly these days." Hopper nodded, another small smile on his face.

"Well, you look beautiful." El blushed, unable to keep the wide smile from appearing on her face.

"Thanks." She said, holding her hands in front of her and twisting her fingers together. Her dad moved to leave but El turned around, stopping him. "Hey dad?"

Hopper paused, looking at her with a confused expression on his face, his eyebrows furrowed together and his mouth slightly downturned.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry about what?" He asked, taking a step towards her and sitting on the edge of her bed. She followed, looking down at her lap.

"For not telling you." She says, the words heavy on her tongue. Her words are sincere, but the lies that are buried within them make her stomach twist with guilt.

Hopper scoffs slightly, throwing his arm around her shoulder and squeezing. Tears were hot and heavy in the back of El's throat and she had to take a deep breath. "It's alright, kid. I'm not mad." He pulls her in tighter, tucking her head against him and pressing a kiss to the crown of her head.

El shakes her head against his shirt, feeling burning tears collecting in the corner of her eyes. "You were upset though." She says, miraculously being able to hold her voice steady.

"El, sweetheart." Her dad says, lifting her up so he can look at her as he speaks. He brushes the hair from her face, smiling. "I think I was just in shock when I found out and sure I was a little upset that you didn't tell me, but you're a teenager and you're entitled to keep things to yourself sometimes."

Despite herself, El smiles. "So you're not mad?"

Hopper laughs, shaking his head. He pulls her into him once more, rubbing her shoulder. "Of course not. As long as you're happy and safe, I have nothing to be mad about." He gives her one more kiss on the top of her head before standing up. "I'll let you finish getting ready."

El nods, feeling a sob crawling up the back of her throat, threatening to escape at any moment. She turned away from the door, looking at herself in the mirror. Thinking about her dad's words as he softly closed the door behind him, she took a deep, shaky breath.

"As long as you're happy and safe." Was she happy?

Part of her was. Against her better judgement, being Mike's fake girlfriend was nice, sure, it wasn't real and it likely wouldn't ever be, but it was fun to pretend. It was easy to live in the moment, when Mike was holding her hand or slinging his arm around her shoulder or writing her notes about how pretty she looked or how great her British Lit presentation had been.

But a bigger part of her wasn't. While it was easy to live in the moment, as soon as the moment would end, reality would snap itself into clear view around her. Mike's hand would drop from hers and he would take a step away and her heart would produce dull ache in her chest.

It hurt so badly sometimes, but El didn't know how to stop. Not now, not when she was in this deep. Not when even through the pain, part of her still liked it.

Taking a glimpse of herself in the mirror, she noticed tear stains underneath her eyes as her cheeks were red. She breathed in, watching herself as she released a breathe, her hands coming up to push her hair back. A look at the clock told her she needed to get going or she was going to be late, and from what she knew about Karen Wheeler, punctuality was key.

So, she plastered a smile on her face, grabbed her jacket and willed her heart to beat on.

“So, El. How long have you lived in Hawkins?”

El, who had been pushing peas around on her plate, trying hard not to show her disdain for them, looked up at Mrs. Wheeler and smiled. “A little over three years. I moved here the summer before eighth grade.”

She spots Mike across the table, rolling his eyes. “Mom, you met El when she first moved here.” He says, annoyance rippling through his voice. His mother pointedly ignores him, only turning more in her chair to look at El.

“And you moved here from where, exactly?” Mrs. Wheeler takes a sip of her wine and El’s mouth hurts from forcing a smile on her face, but she refuses to let her facade falter. Even if thinking about where she came from hurts at her heart.

“Uh, Larabee.” She says, feeling Mike’s eyes on her. “It’s a couple towns outside of Indianapolis.” Turning back to her plate, she lifts her head, meeting Mike’s gaze. He gives her a small smile and her stomach swoops. Under the table she rubs her sweaty palms against the hem of her dress, cursing herself for being so nervous.

There’s a beat of silence, the only noise being that of Holly slurping her milk to El’s right. She had insisted in sitting next to El, practically pushing her older brother out of the seat. The look on Mike’s face at being forcibly removed by his seven year old sister had been the funniest thing El had seen all week.

“Do you ever visit Larabee, El?” Mike’s mother asks again, her wine glass still in hand.

(El’s not sure if she ever put it down to begin with.)

There’s a weird lump in El’s throat as her mind flashes to Wheel of Fortune playing on TV and the empty eyes that would look at her as El talked about her day. She shakes her head, swallowing the lump and plastering a smile on her face.

“Not really, not recently anyway.” She shrugs. “I really like it here in Hawkins though.” With a smile, she takes a bite of her food, trying not to cringe as she bites down on a spoonful of peas. Mike is still watching her across the table, which is making her heart thump harshly against her ribs.

Mike’s mom hums thoughtfully, causing El’s palms to sweat again. “Your mom must miss you though, unless she comes to visit you here.” The question is innocent enough, based on the casual way Mrs. Wheeler sips her wine and the easy smile that crosses her face.

El, however, freezes. She feels the color leave her face and under the table, her hands begin to shake. Bile rises in her throat and she swallows roughly to clear the lump that’s beginning to form. There’s a pit in her stomach and suddenly the peas look even more unappetizing than they had before.

“El, you okay?” Mike asks softly across the table. Hot tears prick the corners of the eyes and her heart squeezes uncomfortably in her chest. El can feel both Mrs. Wheeler and Holly’s eyes on her and she takes a deep breath.

When she lifts her eyes, Mike is looking at her, concern etched in the curves of his face. She remembers then, that Mike doesn’t know about her mother. No one in Hawkins does, except for Will and Max. El had never wanted the rest of the boys to pity her, so she never told them about what really happened to her mom.

Clearing her throat, El decides it’s now or never. She still doesn’t want Mike to pity her, she really doesn’t. But, she also doesn’t want to lie. Not about this, at least. Her mom deserves better than to be wrapped up in El’s web of lies.

“My mother passed away a couple years ago, actually.” She says, looking down at her hands. “That’s the reason I moved in with my dad.”

Mrs. Wheeler immediately brings her hand to her heart, setting her wine glass down on the table. “Oh sweetheart. I’m sorry, I had no idea.” Mrs. Wheeler glares at her son, who doesn’t notice, as he’s too busy looking at El.

El shrugs, giving a watery smile to Mike's mother. "It's alright, Mrs. Wheeler. I don't really tell a lot of people."

A silence settles over the dinner. El directs her attention back to her plate, willing Mike and his family to stop looking at her. She feels like they're all pitying her and it makes her want to dig herself into a hole. Eventually the noise of Holly chewing on her chicken fills the air and El smiles.

"Well, I think that your mother raised a wonderful girl and she would be extremely proud of you." There's a tremble to Mrs. Wheeler's voice that makes El's stomach twist. She doesn't hear comments like that very often. She heard them when she was younger, from her father and aunt, right after her mom's death, but that had been years ago. To hear them from a woman who, for all intents and purposes, she's meeting for the first time, is something she doesn't quite know how to handle.

Especially because it feels a whole hell of a lot like pity.

The conversation shifts after that. Mrs. Wheeler asks Holly about her dance class and the seven year old happily chatters away, carrying the conversation. El directs her attention back to her food, the hairs on the back of her neck still standing, and a shiver running down her spine.

She realizes then that Mike is looking at her. She doesn't think he ever stopped.

El doesn't want to look up and see the look on his face. She already knows exactly what it would look like. It would be the same face she'd seen a million times before.

But she can't see it on Mike's face, she can't. The mere thought makes her skin crawl. She doesn't want his pity, that's why she never told him to begin with. She already feels like he's taking pity on her by agreeing to fake date her, she doesn't need to get even more of it from him.

Taking a bite of her food, she swallows it harshly, refusing to look up. The peas are bitter and sting her throat, but it's better than

meeting Mike's eyes.

It darkens and chills quickly that night and Mike offers to give El a ride home.

"I was just going to walk to the station." She tells Mike after he offers. "My dad will be done with his shift soon and he can drive me home."

Mike scoffs, like that's the most preposterous idea he's ever heard, and grabs his keys from the hook by the door. "Mom! I'm driving El home!" He shouts over his shoulder towards the kitchen.

His mother appears in the doorway, a small smile on her face. "Alright, drive carefully." She says with a certainly motherly kindness and gentleness that makes El's heart twist. "El, sweetheart, it was wonderful to meet you. You're welcome here anytime."

El smiles. "Thank you, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Please, sweetheart, call me Karen." El's eyes go from Mike's mother to Mike himself, who's looking at her with an unreadable emotion swimming in his eyes. "I'm so happy Mike has such a great girl like you in his life."

Mike rolls his eyes at that, putting his hands on El's shoulders and leading her towards the door. "Alright we're leaving now." El cracks a smile at the indignation in Mike's voice as he practically pushes her out the door.

"Bye Mrs. Wheeler!" She calls over Mike's shoulder, giggling as the door slams shut behind them.

They walk in silence to Mike's car, the cold air whipping around them and making El's face cold. "You really don't have to drive me." She says as her hand hovers over the passenger door handle.

Mike eyes her, his nose already red from the cold and his breath visible as he breathes. “El, c’mon. It’s freezing out. I’m not going to make you walk anywhere when there’s a good chance you could freeze to death.”

There’s a finality to his voice and El knows there’s no point arguing with him. It’s not that she doesn’t want a ride home, but she has a feeling that as soon as they’re actually alone, she’s going to get hit with a wave of Mike’s pity, which is the last thing she wants.

Luckily, they drive mostly in silence to her house, Mike humming along quietly to the radio. He has his eyes trained on the road ahead of him and El can’t help but look at him. He looks practically angelic in the moonlight streaming in through the window and when they pass a streetlight and his entire face is illuminated, she’s reminded of just how beautiful he is.

“My mom really liked you, I think.” He says when they turn onto her street. “She doesn’t usually call people sweetheart after only one dinner.”

El can’t help but laugh softly, shaking her head. “I’m glad I have her approval.” Truthfully, El doesn’t know how she feels about Mrs. Wheeler liking her. One one hand she’s glad, of course, because despite their current situation, Mike is her friend and she wants her friends parents to like her. But, on the other hand, she won’t be Mike’s girlfriend for long, and she’s afraid as soon as she isn’t, Mrs. Wheeler’s sweet disposition towards her will turn sour.

“You’ll probably be my only fake girlfriend she approves of.” Mike says with a small chuckle as he pulls up in front of her house.

El forces out a laugh in return, the words chipping away at her ever cracking heart. “Thanks for the ride.” She says, giving him a small grin.

“No problem, don’t even mention it.” Mike replies, a smile on his face. She turns to exit the car, but Mike stops her before she can, his hand coming up to touch her shoulder. El freezes, gulping as she looks at him. “El, how come you never told any of us that stuff about your mom?”

Sitting back in her seat, Mike's hand drops from her shoulder and she sighs. "I guess I never wanted you guys to feel sorry for me." She shrugs, looking down at her lap. "I never wanted to feel like you guys were only spending time with me and letting me hang out with you because you pitied me."

Her words hang in the air and Mike nods slowly. He looks like he wants to say something, like he's wracking his brain for the right words, but as each second ticks on, El's stomach twists and turns, so much so that she thinks she might vomit.

"I should go, Joyce is going to get worried." She says after a couple of seconds, moving once again to exit the car. Mike looks like he wants to stop her again, but she opens the door and gets out before he can. "I'll see you Monday, thanks for having me over." She says, her lips barely turning up into a grin before she shuts the door, letting it click close.

Mike is looking at her through the glass, but after a couple seconds he nods, slowly driving away from the curb, his hands barely lifted in a wave.

The cold air whips around her, but the chill between them overpowers it.

When Mike arrives home fifteen minutes later, his mom is waiting for him in the living room.

"Did El get home alright?" She asks as soon as Mike closes the door behind him. He can't help but smile, his mom's clear adoration for El making his heart thump happily in his chest.

"Yeah." Mike says, nodding as he comes into his mother's view. She smiles brightly at him, standing from the couch and coming over to him. "She probably would have froze to death if she had tried to walk home."

His mom squeezes his arms affectionately, not quite being tall enough to squeeze his shoulders. "I'm glad, honey." She smiles on of her affectionate smiles and Mike's heart swoops in his chest. "She's a fantastic girl, I'm so happy for you."

Her words cause him to take a sharp intake of breath and he gives her a small smile. "Thanks, mom."

"Be sure to invite her over for dinner next weekend." His mother says, raising her eyebrows, showing that she will not take no for an answer. "I want to get to know this girl who you're so clearly taken with even more, alright?"

Mike knows that even though she's framing it like a question, it's not, so he nods. He can't help but wonder if him and El will even still be "together" a week from now, but his mom doesn't have to know that.

With one more squeeze, his mom moves around him and disappears out of the room. A couple seconds later, he hears her going up the stairs, leaving him alone. Sighing, Mike flops down on the couch, his conversation with El running through his mind.

He hopes she's not mad at him. Had he pushed too much with talking about her mother? Did he do something wrong with joking about their fake relationship? He thought reminding her that he knew it wasn't real was what she wanted.

God , he had really fucked up by just driving away. He should have said something instead of just sitting there like an idiot. But no, he was just a loser, wastoid who didn't even know how to talk to someone he claimed to be friends with. What the hell was wrong with him?

This is why El was never, ever going to have actual feelings for him.

Rubbing his eyes, he felt exhaustion begin to overtake him as he kicks his shoes off and sits back on the couch. Flipping the tv on, he does his best to push the conversation with El out of his mind before he drives himself crazy.

Too bad it seems like everything reminds him of her and his heart

seems to sound more and more like her name with every thump.

The next day the party (excluding Max and El) descended on the Wheeler house in hunt for adventure.

It had been weeks since they had played any DnD and after Dustin had practically begged on Thursday to play this weekend, and after much arguing and vague threats, Mike finally relented. Of course, he had been stressed about El practically all weekend, so the adventure he had written was probably shitty, but it was better than nothing.

At least that's what he told himself, and what he would tell Dustin if the little shit even tried to complain.

"I still can't believe you're dating my step sister." Will says when him and Mike are moving things around in the basement to get ready. Dustin is upstairs, raiding the pantry no doubt, and Lucas is in the bathroom so it's just the two of them.

It bothers him, the way Will says *my step sister* instead of just, El. Like the only connection Mike had to her prior to their "relationship" was her being Will's sister. But he doesn't comment on it, instead he just shrugs. "Sometimes I still can't believe it either." Mike smirks, setting the chair that he had been carrying down. "Why, Byers, afraid I might be your brother someday?"

Will gags, shaking his head. "Gross."

The two boys start laughing, Lucas reappearing from the bathroom. "Aw did I miss us making fun of Mike being in love with El."

Mike pauses, the color fading from his cheeks. Was his *very* real love for El really that obvious? If his friends had been able to notice it then certainly everyone else had picked up on it too? Did *she* know that he was in love with her? God, he hoped not, maybe that's why she had been acting so weird the night before. She knew he was in love with her and was so freaked out by it that she didn't even want to be

around him anymore.

God he was such a fucking loser.

“Haha, very funny.” He finally retorts, sitting down at the table and folding his arms across his chest. “Didn’t know it was a crime to be in love with my own girlfriend.”

His tongue catches on the word girlfriend, the word half stumbling out of his mouth but Will and Lucas are too focused on his use of the phrase *in love* to notice. Will’s eyes widen and he plops down in his chair, while Lucas whistles lowly, almost sounding impressed.

“No one was saying there was anything wrong with it, we were all just saying it’s a little pathetic.” Lucas says a laugh playing on his lips. “Didn’t know you would actually admit it though.”

Mike groans, partly playing along with Lucas’ teasing, but also part of him feeling stupid for admitting his love for El out loud. “How did you know I was if you didn’t think I would admit it?” He asks after a beat after silence.

Lucas shrugs, taking a seat next to Mike at the table. “I don’t know. Probably because you look at her all ‘Hi, El! El! El! El! I love you so much! Would you marry me?’” Lucas raises his voice an octave to imitate Mike and Mike has to resist the urge to reach over and smack him.

He doesn’t though because Lucas’ words make his stomach curl and he begins to feel sweat collecting at the base of his neck. Does he really look at El like that? Sure, sometimes he finds himself looking at her, like when she’s laughing, clear and bright at one of Dustin’s dumb jokes, or when she reads one of his notes, a small smile on his face. But he doesn’t look at her like he’s *in love* with her...does he?

Luckily, he doesn’t have the time to enter a thought spiral as Dustin comes thundering down the stairs moments later, arms full of bags of chips and cans of soda. Mike didn’t even know they had that much food in their pantry to begin with. He must of been able to hear Lucas’ last words though as he laughs as he sets the snacks down on the table.

“C’mon, it’s not like El doesn’t look at Mike the exact same way.” He says matter of factly, taking the last empty seat at the table. Will, who had been silent during Lucas and Mike’s conversation, looking like he was still trying to digest Mike being in love with his sister, directs his attention to Dustin.

“What?” Will asks. Mike is grateful, as he suddenly feels like he can’t breathe.

Dustin doesn’t seem to notice, ripping open a bag of potato chips and shoving a handful in his mouth. “El. She literally stares at Mike all the time.” He shrugs, nonchalantly. “And usually she’s giving him ‘heart eyes.’” Dustin says, throwing air quotes around the words heart eyes.

Will only looks more weirded out now and he shakes his head, directing his attention to Mike. “I don’t wanna hear about this anymore, can we start?”

Mike, who was still trying to digest Dustin’s words, nodded. He hoped his face wasn’t betraying him and making him look just as confused as he felt. The last thing he needed was his friends thinking he was confused about hearing that his girlfriend apparently stared at him all the time.

It was easy, once the adventure kicked off to put Dustin’s words out of his mind, but he hardly forgot about them. As soon as all three of his friends were out the door, the words were spinning in his mind like a merry go round.

Did El really look at him like she was in love with him? No. She definitely didn’t. Dustin was probably just seeing things. He probably saw her looking at him when he was talking, or something like that. El definitely didn’t ever have so called “heart eyes” when she looked at him. Dustin definitely imagined that, or he was misremembering. Either way, he was wrong.

That Mike knew for sure.

As Mike and El entered the second week of their fake relationship, they both felt a shift.

For El, it was like a punch in the stomach. Mike was constantly reminding her that none of what was happening between them was real. It seemed like every single note he gave her, he felt the need to refer to her as his fake girlfriend. Every moment felt like a weird slap in the face, and she didn't even know why. It's not like Mike had led her to believe that they were actually together and then suddenly changed his mind. This had always been the case.

Regardless, it still hurt when he pulled his hand away from his the minute they were alone, or how he only really smiled, a wide, bright, eye shining Mike Wheeler smile, at her when their friends were looking. She wondered if she had done something wrong, or if Mike was just trying to push her away. It felt like they had taken ten steps back from the friendship they had been forming and El hated it.

Especially because she was definitely still in love with him and it was only getting worse every single day.

For Mike, the shift felt, conflicting, to put it best. On one hand, it felt necessary. He had to stop kidding himself and remind himself that none of this was actually real. El wasn't his girlfriend. She didn't have any kind of feelings for him, and she probably could totally tell he liked her. Which meant she most likely thought he was some kind of pathetic loser. So, the shift was necessary for Mike, it was a nice stone cold reality check.

But on another hand, he hated it. He hated having to let go of her hand, he had come to love the way her fingers felt tangled in his. There was a certain calmness that he felt when they held hands, something he couldn't explain, but he couldn't keep doing it when he didn't need to. He also hated having to remind himself that she wasn't really his girlfriend, but he was afraid. Afraid that if he didn't, he would get lost in the act, that he would slip up one day and call her his girlfriend when they were alone, and totally freak her out. The last thing he wants to do is screw up and cause El to hate him.

Especially when that's pretty much the complete opposite of how he feels about her.

Mike and El are the only ones who feel the shift. They keep the facade up in front of their friends, tenfold in fact, but they both feel it and whether or not they both realize it, everything is about to blow up in their faces.

"Do you, Michael Theodore Wheeler, take Jane Eleanor Hopper to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

"I do." A smile, a wink, a fluttering stomach and a happily beating heart.

"And do you, Jane Eleanor Hopper, take Michael Theodore Wheeler to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

"I do." A shared laugh, a bright twinkle to the eye, a trembling hand and a gentle touch to the skin.

"With the power vested in me, I now pronounce you, husband and wife. You may now kiss your bride."

A thunderous cheer, an unforgettable kiss and a bright, bright future.

El's breathe catches, loudly, in her throat and she nearly jumps from bed, a bright sheen of sweat covered her forehead. Groaning, she puts her head to her hands, her heart beating erratically in her chest as she takes deep breaths.

She can't believe how *real* her dream had felt. Sure, embarrassingly enough, it wasn't the first time she had ever dreamed about marrying Mike, but it had never felt so real before. So real where she felt like if she had reached out, her consciousness would have felt his skin under her fingertips.

In fact, she swears she can still feel his lips on hers.

Next to her, Max shifts in her sleep, barely disturbed by El's movements. That doesn't surprise her, though. She swears Max could sleep through an elephant stampede. Giving her best friend's dozing form a smile, El pushes herself out of bed and slowly makes her way to the bathroom, not wanting to wake anyone in the still sleeping house up.

In the bathroom, she eyes her appearance, embarrassed by the flush in her cheeks. She hates how she dreamed about Mike like that. It wasn't new, dreaming about him, it happened often, especially lately, but this was a whole new level that El had no idea how to handle.

Rubbing her hands to her face, she sighs. "God." She mutters into the empty bathroom, taking a seat on the turned down toilet seat.

Her heart is still thumping quickly in her chest and she's pretty sure her hands are shaking and everything in her dream just felt so real and tangible and all the emotions that dream El felt, she feels herself feeling now, as real, conscious El.

She doesn't think she can do this anymore.

When she used to dream about Mike, at least she always knew it was a dream, she never had anything except for a few friendly smiles and hearty laughs to compare it to. Now, despite the fakeness of said relationship, she has kisses (well, one *actual* kiss), and hand holding, and meeting the parents to compare it to.

A knock on the door startles her in the middle of her contemplation and she jumps, her hand going to her heart, which had yet to quell it's beating.

"El, sweetheart, you in there?" Her dad's voice comes softly through the door.

"Uh, yeah." She says, flipping the sink on, feigning brushing her teeth. "I'll be out in a minute."

Her dad huffs, sounding unconvinced, but El knows he won't push her. "Alright well, wake Max up when you're done, I'm about to start breakfast up." El nods, even though he can't see her, but she hears

him push away from the door and descend down the stairs and she sighs.

Splashing water on her face, El takes another look at herself in the mirror. She realizes that it's Saturday and that means she has to have dinner with Mike and his mom and sister again. After her dream, she doesn't know if she's going to make it through the evening.

With one last sigh, she pushes herself away from the sink and exits the bathroom, her hands still trembling slightly. There's a dull ache worming its way onto her heart and she knows that she's not going to be able to keep this act up much longer.

The only question is, how much more will her heart be able to endure before it breaks completely.

Dinner at the Wheelers runs about as smoothly as El expects it too.

Like last week, Holly cares much of the conversation. Rambling on about the goings on in the second grade, happy to have such a captive audience in El, who focuses all her attention on Holly, too nervous to look at anyone else. Mike spends most of the dinner with his eyes on El, but El refuses to meet his gaze, afraid she might burst into tears if she does.

After Max had left that morning, El had spent almost every minute before she arrived at Mike's house thinking about her dream the night before. About how *real* it had all felt, and about how much it hurt that it would only ever be a dream. How everything with Mike would only ever be a dream.

Mrs. Wheeler spends most of the meal smiling at El and her children. The gesture both warms and breaks El's heart, which is why she can't bring herself to look Mrs. Wheeler in the eye. She knows if she does, the floodgates will open and she'll absolutely shatter.

By the time dinner was over, El was desperate to get away from the

table. So much so that she offered to clear the plates and do the dishes, much to the delighted surprise of Mrs. Wheeler.

“Sweetheart, you don’t have to do that.” Mike’s mom said, standing from her chair and practically pushing El back in her seat. “It’s my house, I can do it.”

“No, no, Mrs. Wheeler, I can do it.” El replies, flashing a tight smile. “I do it all the time at home, it’s not that big of a deal.” She shrugs, grabbing her own plate and snagging Mike’s empty one as she makes her way out of the room, Mrs. Wheeler’s argument lost behind her.

Once in the kitchen, she leans against the counter and lets out a deep breath. It shouldn’t surprise her that she’s only alone for a couple of seconds, Mike appearing in the doorway soon after her, his mom and sister’s plates in his hand.

“Thought I could give you a hand.” He says with an easy smile, coming up next to her at the sink, starting the water. “My mom is still standing in shock in the dining room that she’s not the one that has to clear the table without telling one of her children to.”

“Thanks.” She says, returning his smile, albeit not as easily as Mike had. “I didn’t mean to step on your mom’s toes like that, I just thought I could be helpful.”

Mike shrugs one shoulder. “Trust me, she was just surprised.” He gives her a smirk. “In her mind you’re now just the most helpful significant other any of her children have ever had.” He laughs, shaking his head. “Even if you’re my fake girlfriend.”

He lets out another laugh, but El can barely hear him. Her ears are ringing and she feels like the floor could open up and swallow her up whole. Mike is still talking, she can hear the buzz of his voice, rambling on about something or other. Usually, the sight of Mike babbling on would make her heart sing happily, but now it makes bile crawl up the back of her throat.

She can’t do this anymore, she can’t. It’s all getting too much. She’s in too deep and she can’t do any of it anymore.

Her hands grip the countertop and she breathes in through her nose, goosebumps erupting across the skin of her neck and the arc of her collarbone. The room is spinning and she feels like she's going to vomit.

Oh yeah, she's definitely going to vomit.

Pushing away from the counter, she blindly sprints through the Wheeler house, propelling herself through the front door. Before she knows exactly what's happening, she's leaning over the front steps, Mrs. Wheeler's dinner of macaroni and cheese and roast beef coming back up. She groans, hot tears streaming down her face.

"El, are you okay?" She hears Mike behind her, closing the door so it's just the two of them outside. She wonders if his mom and sister saw her, and her stomach turns. She would probably vomit again, but there's nothing left in her stomach.

Instead she chokes out a sob, shaking her head. She feels like she can't breathe and Mike's presence isn't making things any easier for her. The cold November evening air makes her shiver and she feels Mike's hand on the small of her back. However, she flinches away.

Standing, she turns around so she's looking at Mike, gulping when she sees the hurt etched on his features. She realized she never answered his question, and it's then that she makes a choice.

"I can't do this anymore." She whispers, swallowing down another sob that threatens to escape.

Mike looks confused, his eyebrows wrinkling together. "Okay, do you want me to bring you home?" He takes a step towards her, but she steps back, needed to keep the distance between them.

"No, I don't mean dinner tonight. I mean, this." Gesturing between them. "I can't do this anymore, Mike. I can't." She gulped, taking a deep breath, willing herself to keep eye contact with him as she spoke. "I'm sorry, I know this was all my idea, but I can't do it anymore."

Tilting his head, Mike's mouth was puckered open. "El, I don't

understand..." He stopped, biting his lip. "I'm sorry if I did something..."

El felt her vision blur with tears and blinked them away, shaking her head. "No, Mike. You didn't do anything." There was hurt swimming in Mike's eyes and it made El's heart squeeze. "Trust me, none of this is your fault. Don't worry, I'll just tell everyone at school on Monday that we broke up. You never have to worry about this again."

Once the words leave her mouth, Mike's face falls. He still looks confused, but there's something else still etched in the corners of his face that she can't quite decipher. She has a sinking feeling it's probably exactly the emotion that she had been trying to avoid.

Pity.

"El, I still don't understand...why aren't we doing this anymore? I know you said it probably wouldn't last long, but I thought that everything was going really well..." He trailed off and El took a deep breath. He looked so confused and it made her hands shake.

"Because Mike, I'm in love with you." The words tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop them. Mike froze, his mouth popping open.

The words hung in the air like icicles, and El's heartbeat thundered in her ears, so much so that she could barely hear herself breathing. Or maybe she couldn't hear herself breathing because she couldn't anymore.

However, now that the truth was out, she didn't know if she could stop herself from continuing to explain. "I'm totally in love with you and you'll never feel the same way and I accepted that a long time ago."

Taking another deep breath, she shoves her hair behind her ears and wipes at her face. "It's my own fault for getting involved in this with you in the first place, but I thought I would be able to just push it all away, but I can't." She's full on crying now, tears warming her cheeks. "I can't keep pretending to be with you when I know it will never be real."

“You agreed to helping with me because you felt sorry for me, because I’m Will’s sister and you’re nice and kind and you help people, but I know that it doesn’t mean you feel anything towards me that I do towards you. And you probably never will, and while I’ve accepted that, I can’t keep on pretending that there’s something between us.”

The silence that hangs between them once the last words leave her mouth is deafening. El is fairly certain it’s quiet enough for both of them to hear the sound of her heart breaking. Mike’s silence speaks loudest, though.

His face is nothing short of shocked, his lips puckered open and his eyes as wide as saucers. He looks like he might be searching for something to say in response, but the longer the silence between them stretches, the more and more she feels like she can’t breathe.

“I should probably go.” She mutters after a couple of moments. Out of the corner of her eye, she spots movement behind the curtains of the front window and an embarrassed shiver runs down her spin.

She cannot *believe* she just admitted all of that to him. Now he’s probably going to never want to talk to her again. If evidenced by how he’s not meeting her gaze and hasn’t said anything since she dropped the bomb on him.

“Like I said, don’t worry, I’ll just tell everyone on Monday that we broke up.” She said again, wiping at her eyes. Mike still hasn’t moved, his face still frozen in shock, and the sight makes El’s heart plummet down to her stomach, which is still curled in an uncomfortable ball.

When Mike still responds with radio silence, El knows she can’t stand there any longer and wait for him to come around and confirm that everything she said was true. She already knows that it is, but she’s pretty sure that the confirmation will break her even more. However, she doesn’t want to just run away in tears, she’s already embarrassed herself enough in front of Mike and his family. On top of everything, she doesn’t him to think she’s pathetic for *this* .

So, she does the strongest thing she can think of. She tilts her chin,

turns on her heels and walks away from him.

The further and further she walks away from him, the more and more she realizes that her heart isn't with her anymore, it's back there with Mike. Even though he doesn't want it, it still belongs to him.

Another sob creeps his way up her throat and in the dull moonlight of Maple Street, she can't hold this one back.

Notes for the Chapter:

ALRIGHT, i didn't want to ramble too much at the beginning bc i wanted to get right into the meat of the chapter, but i wanted to say thank you so much to all of the comments, kudos and bookmarks i've gotten on this fic so far. i've been floored with the support and kind words that have been left for me and it amazes me so much how much love this fic has gotten. it truly has blown me away and i feel so lucky, so thank you all so much.

with that being said, i hope this chapter didn't break your heart too much. i promise, promise, promise it'll all be fixed next chapter but this had to be done. i hope you can all forgive me.

please let me know what you think in the comments! feel free to yell at me if need be, i'll accept that. also feel free to come and yell at me on tumblr, you can find me at the url [finnwolfhards](#), i totally understand the need for yelling, so don't be shy.

also, a very special thank you and shout out to my great pals ally (paranoids) and julie (FateChica) for being the most supportive and encouraging ears as i've been writing this. this fic wouldn't exist without them.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

hello friends. like i promised at the end of the next chapter, hopefully this chapter fixes everything. thank you guys all so much for all the wonderful comments and love that i got on the previous chapter, even if it did break some of y'all's hearts. this fic has been so much fun to write, so to get so much amazing feedback has meant the world to me. so thank you.

so this chapter just about wraps everything up. the next chapter is going to be an epilogue that will be 100% fluff, so this is the end of the actual story, but there will be more. i promise.

special thank you to ally (paranoids) and julie (FateChica) for reading this chapter over for me and telling me that it's good and worth posting. love y'all!!

“So wait, let me get this straight. You and Mike were never actually together?”

El, who was laying face down on her bed, cheek against her pillow, nodded. It was the third time Max had asked that same exact question and each time El was sinking further and further into the comfort of her bed. The first she had ignored the question completely, and the second time she had only groaned, refusing to answer.

“Wow.” Max said, nodding. “I’m honestly kind of impressed.”

At that, El sits up, pushing her hair from her face. She had been embarrassed at first when telling Max the full story, afraid her best friend would judge her for lying about having a boyfriend, so hearing Max say she was impressed was both surprising and heartwarming.

“What do you mean?” El asked, her voice scratchy from crying practically all night. It was pathetic, really it was, but she couldn’t help it. Luckily, Max hadn’t judged her too much. She also hadn’t asked any questions when El had called her last night nearly sobbing over the phone.

After walking home in the bitter cold, the house had been empty, Will off at Dustin’s house and her parents away for the night, so calling Max had seemed like the best option. The last thing El had wanted was to be alone, she also just really wanted a hug from her best friend.

At first, El had been hesitant to tell Max the truth. She considered just telling Max that her and Mike had gotten in a fight and broken up; I mean it was partly true, they had ended their relationship, but not in the way Max would think. But then, Max was there, running her hands through El’s hair and the whole story just kinda slipped out.

When El had stumbled through the whole story the first time, starting with how she had lied two weeks ago at their sleepover and ending with walking away from Mike, Max had merely listened. Occasionally gasping or humming softly, but for the most part just letting El get it all out. How El managed to tell the whole thing without drowning her words out with sobs she’ll never know.

But now, it was morning and El wasn’t crying anymore, so in the warm, early morning glow of her bedroom, her best friend wanted answers.

“Ellie, you’re just the worst liar on the face of the planet that’s why.” Max said, snorting. El frowned, covering her face with her hands. “Also, I’m impressed you managed to “date” him for that long without accidentally letting it slip that were in love with him.”

El peeked through the cracks of her fingers just in time to see her best friend give a small shrug. “I’m not that bad of a liar.” She muttered, causing Max to laugh.

“Yes you are.” She said pointedly, raising her eyebrows. “I’m also extremely impressed and flattered that you went to such an extreme

to prove me wrong.”

At this, El pushed herself up into a sitting position, leaning back against the pillows of her bed. “Haha, you’re hilarious.” Her voice dripped in sarcasm, which made Max roll her eyes. El couldn’t help but crack a small smile.

“Hey, I’m just saying, you didn’t have to make out with him in the hallway and then fake date him for god knows how long you were going to do so just to prove to me that you didn’t need me to set you up on dates anymore.” Max said, holding her hands up in surrender. “So, I’m very flattered that you went through all that just for lil ol’ me.”

Sighing, El let her head fall back, barely flinching when it hit the wall behind her. “Well, now I’m kind of wishing that I hadn’t.” She whispered, willing herself not to cry, again. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, swallowing the tears that were climbing up her throat.

She felt a shift of weight on the bed and then a soft tug on her arm. Without opening her eyes, she leaned into her best friend’s touch, letting herself be pulled down, head to Max’s shoulder and their hands intertwined.

“I feel like I ruined everything.” El whispered against the soft cotton of Max’s t shirt. “What if Mike never talks to me again.”

Max sighed, nuzzling her cheek against the top of El’s head. “Ellie, you didn’t ruin everything. Trust me, everything is going to be okay.”

Shaking her head, El opened her eyes and lifted her head from Max’s shoulder. “How could you possibly know that, you didn’t see the way he looked at me when I told him. He had no expression on his face whatsoever.”

The mere thought of how Mike had looked at her last night, his eyes wide and his mouth open made El’s heart squeeze uncomfortably in her chest. His face had haunted her dreams all night long, and now apparently was going to be haunting her during the day too.

"El, can I let you in on a little secret?" Max said, squeezing El's hand. She nodded, using her free hand to swipe at her face, wiping away any stray tears that might have fallen from her eyes.

Sighing, Max pushed her own hair back from her face and smiled. "The reason everyone at school, me included, believed that you and Mike were together wasn't just because you guys told everyone that you were, or even that you guys made out in the hallway. The reason it was so believable and why I'm so shocked to hear none of it was real is because you guys acted like you were in love with each other."

Feeling her eyebrows rise on her face, El looked to her friend, her face puckered in shock. "What do you mean?" She whispered, her heart thumping with a combination of nerves and interest.

"I just mean that outside of the handholding and the love notes, you guys always looked at each other like the other person was like the greatest human being on the face of the earth. Which yeah, I know you always thought that about Mike but he looked at you the same way too." Max's voice was soft and genuine, making El's entire body go warm, even if she still wasn't convinced.

"That's because we were trying to act that way." El said, trying her best to keep her voice firm and unwavering. In her head however, she was reeling. Did Mike really look at her the same way she looked at him?

"Eh, I don't think so, El." Max sighed. "I don't think you can fake the kind of love he has in his eyes when he looks at you."

El contemplated this. Part of her, of course, was bursting at the seams. If what Max was saying was true, that meant that Mike felt the same way about her that she did about him. That wouldn't explain why he didn't say anything the night before, but the idea still made her heart thump happily in her chest.

However, a much larger, and much more sensical part of her, thought that it was bullshit. She didn't necessarily believe that Max was lying, Max wouldn't do that when she knew how upset El was, but merely, she was just wrong about what she was seeing. Because if Mike *did* look at El the way that Max was saying he did, then why was he

acting like such a... *mouthbreather* .

She groaned, trying to sink even more so into the comfort of her best friend's shoulder, even if it was bony and beginning to hurt as she further pressed her temple against it. "I really don't think that you're right. Besides, if he felt the same way, why didn't he say something last night?"

Max chuckled softly, causing El to frown, but Max's hand quickly came to pat El's knee comfortingly. "Because, he's a boy, and boys are dumb." Max let out a snort and El could feel her friend's head shake against her own. "Poor boy was probably caught way off guard and didn't know what to do."

"So, you're saying I sent him into a state of shock by telling him how I felt."

"God, yes, El. That's exactly what I'm saying." Max exclaimed, throwing her hands up in the air, nearly smacking El in the face by doing so. "You're pretty much one of the most awesome girls ever, of course Mike was surprised when you told him you loved him, he probably only ever dreamed of a girl as cool as you *liking* him."

El felt doubt begin to creep into the corners of her body, spreading from her head to her toes. Her teeth worried her bottom lip and she lifted her head from Max's shoulder to look at her.

"Do you really think that?" Max rolled her eyes at El's question, shoving her softly.

"Of course I think that." Grabbing El's hands, Max squeezed affectionately. "El, trust me. I've seen the way that Mike looks at you and he definitely at least likes you, if not more. Also, he wrote you love notes for crying out loud."

"They weren't love notes, they were just dumb notes where he always mentioned he was my fake boyfriend and I was his fake girlfriend." El muttered,

Max snorted, "No boy spends that much time writing notes to a girl unless they like them. They can claim that it's just for some act, but

trust me if Mike is writing you notes that tell you how smart and pretty he thinks that you are, he has feelings for you.”

There was a finality to Max’s words. A bluntness that caused El to snap her mouth closed. She knew that Max was done talking about it now, that if El tried to argue her anymore, she would be ignored and shut down.

“Thank you.” El whispered, giving her best friend a small, grateful smile. She wasn’t convinced, her head was still spinning with memories of last night, but she was appreciative of Max’s efforts.

“Anytime, space cadet.” Max smirked, pulling El’s hands and laying her head on El’s shoulders. The gesture warmed El’s heart and she smiled, this time fully and genuine. For a moment, El basked in the peacefulness and calmness of the moment, allowing her mind to go blank.

However, as the moment of serenity faded, uncertainty weighed heavy on El’s heart. Max’s words were swirling in her mind and making her dizzy, mixing confusingly with the images of the night before. The only thing that was clear was a question.

Did Mike really love her?

When Mike awoke on Sunday morning, he didn’t remember anything from the night before. He didn’t even remember going to bed last night.

Certain things he was able to recall, El knocking on the door, making him smile with how pretty she looked, his mom’s shocked face when El offered to do the dishes, him and El in his kitchen.

El walking away from him with tears in her eyes.

That last memory felt like a hard punch to the gut. The image of El’s tear stained face, her hair whipping around her face and her cheeks

cold from the wind, was an image Mike didn't think he would ever be able to get out of his head as long as he lived.

Then, slowly but surely, the rest of the night came flooding back to him, piecing themselves together in his mind.

Everything about what happened between him and El the night before came crashing over him like a tidal wave. El running away from him and puking her dinner out in his mom's bushes. The way she had flinched away from him and the crushing weight that had settled on his chest as he watched her step away from him. El telling him that she loved him while he stood there, shell shocked.

Oh god.

El had told him that she loved him. El had told *him* that she *loved* him. That she was *in* love with him. Mike hadn't dreamed that, it had actually happened.

The literal girl of his dreams, who he hadn't been able to stop thinking about for the last *two* weeks had told him she was in love with him, and Mike had just stood there like a wastoid.

God , he was the biggest loser on the face of the planet. Who did that? Who just stood there, not saying a freaking word while the actual most amazing girl in the entire world poured her heart out? Only the biggest loser and wastoid on the face of the planet that's who.

Sitting up in bed, Mike ran his hands down his face, trying to figure out what he was supposed to do now.

His heart was thumping happily in his chest, pleased to know that it's affection was reciprocated and Mike took a moment to let his heart celebrate. El, who was far and beyond out of his league, loved him. Loved *him* , aka the biggest nerd in the entire universe. He had no idea why, but there were some things that you just didn't question, and this, this was one of them.

His brain on the other hand, his brain was in turmoil. Mike couldn't ignore how frustrated he was at himself, and his dumb, stupid brain,

for just standing there like an idiot when El had confessed her feelings. It's not like she hadn't given him plenty opportunities to respond or anything.

Why did he have to be such a mouthbreather?

He had no doubt in his mind that El probably hated him now. Even if twelve hours ago she had loved him (something he didn't think he would ever fully be able to comprehend, let alone be able to admit to himself without wanting to jump up and down on his bed like a five year old), she certainly hated him now. Not only had he been unresponsive, he also hadn't chased after her or even bothered to make sure she had gotten home safely. Hell, at this point Mike probably hated himself enough for the both of them.

Despite that deep seeded, very real, fear that El might hate him now, Mike knew what he had to do. He couldn't let El think that her feelings weren't reciprocated. It terrified him, the thought of telling El he was in love with her, it had terrified him all week, but now, he had to swallow his fear and face it.

He needed to go and tell El he loved her.

Even if it meant getting a door slammed in his face and his heart being stomped on. That was all worth the risk. El had put her heart on the line the night before and Mike had done the worst thing he could have done, if she wanted to do the same to him, he would be able to face it.

He just needed her to know.

Glancing at his clock, he saw it was a little after nine and pushed himself out of bed, throwing on a pair of jeans and an old hoodie he was pretty sure he had since middle school. Taking a look at himself in the mirror, he took a deep breath, trying not to let his thundering, nervous heartbeat stop him.

It was now or never Wheeler.

Going down the stairs two at a time, he paused by the front door, the sound of his mother and sister's voices floating peacefully down the

hallway. He cringed as the image of El puking the night before flashed in his mind, he hoped his mom wasn't too mad about her bushes being in the splash zone.

"Mom! I'm going over to El's house." He shouted, grabbing his keys from the hook. Not waiting for any kind of response, he flung the door open and stepped out into the chilly air of the morning. It felt like it might snow, and Mike wished he had grabbed a jacket, but he didn't want to go inside and grab one. If he went back inside, he might chicken out and not come back out, which was not an option. He had something he had to do and hell, he was going to do it.

He had a fake ex girlfriend to profess his love to.

He only hoped that she wanted to hear it.

About an hour after her and Max's heart to heart, El was alone.

Max had left about a half an hour earlier, remembering she had breakfast plans with Lucas and needed to get home to shower, and the rest of her family was still out from the night before. She had no idea when to expect anyone, so when there was a knock at the door a little before nine thirty, she was surprised.

At first she was just going to avoid it. She wasn't expecting anyone and she also didn't particularly *want* to see anyone, as her face was still a little puffy from crying and she was still wearing her pajamas. It's not like anyone would know she was there, she didn't have a car and the entire house was silent.

But then, she heard a voice.

"El...it's Mike." El's heart stopped in her chest, freezing her in place. She was in the kitchen, far enough away from the door where Mike wouldn't be able to see her, but close enough where she could hear him if he spoke a normal speaking volume. "I don't know if you're in there, if you're not then this is kind of embarrassing but if you are,

can we uh...talk?" El gulped. "I have something important I want to tell you."

There was a tentativeness to Mike's voice that made her hesitantly take a step towards the front door. She could hear Mike shuffling around on the front porch, and she could practically see him rocking back and forth from foot to foot with nerves. It made her heart sink to think about. Even though she was still upset about last night and a large part of her did not want to see Mike right now, she knew he deserved a chance to explain himself.

So, taking a deep breath, she stepped forward and opened the door.

"Mike." She whispered, feeling the air leave her lungs as she looked at him. He was wearing a hoodie that was far too small for him, the sleeves falling inches above his wrist, and his jeans bunched awkwardly at the knees, like he had gotten dressed haphazardly this morning in the dark. "What are you doing here?"

Mike looked almost as surprised to see her as she had felt to see him, but why? He had been the one to knock on her door. He must have thought she wouldn't want to listen to him.

"El." He said after a second of looking at her, his eyes widening ever so slightly and his mouth puckering. It made her heart jump. Mike paused for a second, almost as if he was trying to remember why he was there. "I needed to talk to you." He cleared his throat. "About last night."

A weight dropped into her stomach and she shifted on her feet, crossing her arms over her chest. "What about last night?" El whispers, hating the way her voice nearly cracks. "If you came over here just to tell me that you don't feel the same way but you still want to be friends then you can save it."

There's a flash of hurt that crosses Mike's face and El feels her heart sink ever so slightly. "That's not what I'm here to tell you." He takes a step towards her on the porch, his eyes softening. El gulps.

"Then, what did you come here to tell me?" El asks, suddenly feeling extremely nervous. *Is he....no. He can't possibly.*

"I..uh..." Mike's fingers drum anxiously against his leg. "I came to to tell you that," She watches as he takes a deep breath, her heart speeding up in her chest. "El, I'm in love with you."

El has to pinch herself to make sure that this is really happened. It doesn't feel like it is, she feels like she's dreaming. Because there is no way, no actual way, that Mike is standing here telling her that he's in love with her.

"What..." She says after a beat or so of silence, her mind reeling. Her entire body seems to have gone into a state of shock, it's a miracle she was able to get out well, anything. Now she knew how Mike had felt the night before.

"El, I love you." Mike says, this time more confident, taking another small step towards her. "I'm sorry that I didn't tell you last night, but I was kind of in shock because you were telling me that you were in love with me and I honestly kind of thought that I was dreaming or something. But now I realize that it kind of just made me seem like a jerk and you probably hate me now or something and I -" He's rambling and El can see the corners of his cheeks beginning to redden, either from embarrassment or the cold air and she cuts him off.

"Mike. I don't hate you." El said, shaking her head softly. She was still trying to wrap her brain around everything that he had just said, and wasn't quite sure what else there was to say.

Mike breathed a sigh of relief and El's stomach swooped. "I was really afraid that after last night you were going to hate me, and I feel *awful* about what happened." His voice was soft and El's heart pitter pattered against her ribcage.

"Can I ask you something, though?" El asked, swallowing. She had a lot of questions swirling around in her head she was trying to make sense of, as this was definitely something she hadn't seen coming.

"Anything."

"Why were you always so insistent that none of what was happening between us was real?" El asked softly. She knew it was probably a

silly question, but it was Mike's insistence throughout the last week that everything between them was *fake* and *not real* that had made her so against believing that he actually could have feelings for her in the first place.

"I guess I just didn't want to make you uncomfortable." Mike said with a small shrug. "I never, and I mean never, thought that there was any way that you felt even a fraction of what I felt and that last thing I wanted was for you to think that I was taking advantage of you or that I thought we were actually together."

While El believes him, one part of his explanation sticks out to her and makes her pinch her eyebrows together, confused. "Why did you think that I would never have feelings for you?"

Mike raises his eyebrows, like he's amazed she's even questioning that part of his reasoning. El swears he looks like he wants to laugh, but he doesn't, merely shaking his head with a small, breathy sigh. "Well, El. You're kind of the most amazing girl in pretty much the entire world." El starts to shake her head, but Mike keeps speaking. "You're one of the nicest people I've ever met in my entire life, you're one of the only people who I've ever seen make Dustin laugh so hard that milk comes out of his nose." Mike smiles, and El feels an embarrassing blush creep up onto her cheeks. "You're smart and talented at pretty much everything. Not to mention that you're kind of totally gorgeous."

Mike has a blush of his own at the last part of his statement, but he still has a small grin on his face. El's heart glows and she feels warmth spread across her chest and begin to drip through her veins.

"Can I ask you something now?" Mike asks. El hadn't noticed earlier, but he's standing closer to her now, only a few steps away and she has an overwhelming urge to reach out to him, but she doesn't.

"Yes."

Mike looks down at his feet for a moment before looking at her, his eyes swimming in an emotion that El can't quite read. "Last night, you said that you knew I didn't have feelings for you and that nothing would ever happen between us...why did you think that?"

She's taken aback slightly by his question, but regardless, she nods. He explained himself when she had asked him, it's only fair that she do the same.

"For a really long time, I kind of thought that none of you guys were actually my friends." She says softly, surprised by her own willingness to open herself up like this. Mike looks like he wants to argue, or at least say something, but she doesn't let him. "Not that I thought you guys secretly hated me or anything, but I kind of just thought that you only hung out with me because I was Will's sister and I was new in town and you guys all felt bad for me.

"So I guess I thought that you would only ever see me as Will's sister and that you never actually really noticed me when I was there. Which is why I was so surprised when you agreed to help me, I kind of just thought you were taking pity on me."

For some reason, those words cause Mike to shake his head vigorously, his hair falling into his eyes. "El, I have never pitied you, not for a second. Not when you first moved here. Not when I agreed to be your fake boyfriend. Not when you told me about your mom. None of that has ever made me pity you, I promise."

It's those words that finally break open El's floodbanks and she feels tears prick in the corner of her eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Mike says, with a small smile on his face. "I will say that I didn't actually realize that I was in love with you until like a week ago, I think it's something that I've maybe always felt."

El watches as Mike's teeth latch onto his lower lip in thought, almost as if this is the first time he's ever thought about it.

"What do you mean?" She asks softly. There's a small part of her that's almost afraid to know the answer, but a larger part of her is swimming in curiosity, desperate to understand the depth and truth of Mike's feelings for her.

Mike hums softly to himself, rubbing over his lips with his tongue. "Last week, the day I wrote you the note about how I thought you looked pretty. That's when I realized that I had real feelings for you

and that I wished what we were doing together was real. After that, the more I thought about the more I realized that I think my feelings have always kind of been there. I've always thought that you were pretty and smart and kind, but I never realized how much I felt those feelings for you until we started spending more time together."

El, whose heart had been thump, thump thumping happily for the last ten minutes or so, smiles. Part of her still feels like she might be dreaming, but she's not going to listen to that part of her, because she knows that this is real now.

Mike *loves* her.

"Can I ask you one more thing?" He asks after a moment, a small, curious smirk on his face. El nods. "How long have you had feelings for me."

Closing her eyes, El laughs in embarrassment. She can feel her entire body go warm, a deep flush spreading across her skin. "I've kind of had the biggest crush on you since the day we met."

Cracking on eye open, El sees Mike beaming at her, his freckles dancing across his cheekbones and practically sparkling in the mid morning sun. El doesn't think he's ever looked more beautiful.

"You've liked me since middle school, how embarrassing." Mike teases and El snorts, opening her eyes, only to immediately roll them at him.

"You just came all the way over here to confess your love for me." She retorts, crossing her arms over her chest and smirking at him. "Which is equally as embarrassing."

He shakes his head, moving slowly towards her, only stopping when he's right in front of her. She feels every molecule in her body start to explode and it's the most glorious feeling she's ever felt in her entire life.

"No." He whispers. "There's absolutely nothing embarrassing about loving you." His words are surprisingly sincere and El beams.

"You really love me?" She asks, unable to keep the small insecure

part of her completely at bay. She's embarrassed to even be asking, but Mike doesn't seem to care, as he only nods, his hair bouncing.

"Yeah, I really do." He smiles. "I promise." He reaches out for her then, taking her hands in his own and El's skin tingles happily. "So, before I came over here, you were my fake ex girlfriend, I'm hoping now that maybe we can eliminate the two adjectives in that title."

It's just about the dorkiest way that Mike could ask her to be his girlfriend, but El doesn't even care. Her entire body is buzzing with happy contentedness and she doesn't want the feeling to ever, ever go away.

"Yeah, I think that can be arranged." She says, her cheeks starting to sting from how wide she's smiling. Mike's smile matches her own and he pulls her body against his ever so slightly.

El's pretty sure she knows what happens next, until Mike stops pulling back and looking down at her, a concerned look crossing his face. She frowns.

"There's not still a no kissing rule, is there?" He asks. El shakes her head, shoving him with their joined hands, laughing.

"Shut up"

With a smirk, Mike leans down and presses his lips against hers and El practically melts. Their first kiss had been awkward and stiff, Mike not even knowing what was happening and El being riddled with guilt when the whole thing was over, but this kiss is a whole different story. It's the greatest feeling El's ever felt in her entire life.

She feels like she's on cloud nine and if she hadn't pinched herself earlier, she would swear she was dreaming. It all feels so surreal, like she could wake up at any moment, but she knows that that's not the case, that's not it at all.

Against her lips, Mike sighs happily and El's heart drums happily in her chest. *Oh yes, this is real alright.*

Monday morning comes with a bright morning sun and sore cheeks from smiling too much and Mike had absolutely nothing to complain about as he awoke.

He wakes up before his alarm, slightly disgruntled as he had been in the middle of a particularly wonderful dream that involved El and her smiling and laughing and holding his hand. Then, he remembers with a wide grin and quick skip of his heart the events of yesterday and suddenly this is the best Monday of his life.

Because El is his *girlfriend* . His actual, real, definitely not fake girlfriend.

For a moment, when the memories came to him, he feared that he might have dreamed it all, that all of yesterday had been a dream. But, one look over at his desk chair, and his subsequently missing hoodie, confirmed that all of yesterday's happenings were *definitely* not a dream.

A face splitting smile fell upon Mike's lips and he couldn't help jumping out of bed, more than ready to take on Monday.

Dressing as quickly as he could, throwing on a yellow sweater and black corduroys, there was a certain spring in his step as he bounded down the stairs to join his mother and sister for breakfast. His good mood was, of course, picked up on by his mother, as evidenced by her curious grin.

"Someone's in a good mood this morning." She said, handing him a plate of food. Mike shrugged as he sat down next to Holly, who had her eyebrow raised at him.

"Just ready to take on another week, I suppose." Mike said, trying his hardest not to grin too much and give himself away. He didn't want to have to explain everything to his mom, especially first thing in the morning on a Monday. Karen Wheeler was more in tune and understanding than Mike typically gave her credit for, but Mike doubted she would understand him and El's situation.

Hell, Mike was pretty sure him and El might be the only ones who ever understand it. It's not every that your fake girlfriend breaks up with you and then the next day she becomes your real girlfriend.

El, his *girlfriend* . That was going to take some getting used to, in the best possible way.

"Alright, Holls. Let's get going, we gotta go pick El up." Mike said, tapping his sister on the shoulder as he stood from the table. His mom gave him a small smile watching him as he placed his plate in the sink.

Exchanging goodbyes with his mom, within minutes him and his sister were in the car on the way to El's and his sister was eyeing him suspiciously from the backseat. Mike crinkled his eyebrows, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

"What?" He finally asked as they pulled into El's driveway, putting the car in park and absentmindedly gazing at the front porch. He smiled when he remembered how long him and El had stood out there yesterday, exchanging laughs and soft kisses before Mike had finally left a little before her parents came home.

Holly didn't answer, instead shrugging, directing her attention to looking out the window instead. A couple seconds later the passenger door was opening and a rush a cold air and El's wide smile greeted him as his heart immediately began to quicken.

"Hi!" El said, sounding slightly breathlessly and Mike thought it was the most beautiful noise he had ever heard.

"Hey." Mike said, his voice soft. He couldn't draw his eyes away from El as she buckled her seat belt and flashed a smile to Holly in the backseat. He didn't know if it was because she was actually his girlfriend now or what but he swore that El had never looked more beautiful then she did at this very moment.

"What?" She asked softly, no doubt feeling his eyes on her. Mike shook his head, his cheeks pinkening with slightly embarrassment.

"You just," He paused, smiling, "You look really pretty."

El blushed, leaning over and shoving his shoulder softly. There was a wide smile on her face, though, and Mike's heart pitter pattered happily in his chest. It looked like El wanted to say something in response but anything she would have said were cut off by Holly in the backseat.

"Can we go to school now?" She asked bluntly. Mike laughed, nodding and pulling out of El's driveway. Holly nodded, pleased and leaned back in her seat.

As they began the drive to school, Mike allowed his eyes to drift over to El and his stomach swooped. She was smiling as she glanced out the window, watching Hawkins pass by them in a blur.

There was a certain contentedness that settled in Mike's heart as he looked at her. Like this was where he was supposed to be in life. He knew it sounded silly, he was a sixteen year old boy, but there was just something so, settled about the whole thing that made Mike never want this moment to end.

He felt like everything was falling into place, and he couldn't be more happy.

By lunchtime, El felt like she was walking on cloud nine.

Sure, to the student body of Hawkins High School, everything was the same as it had been on Friday. But to El, everything had changed in the *best* possible way. From the note that Mike had left in her locker after second period, which had read in his scrawny handwriting "*you're the greatest real girlfriend in the world*" to catching his eyes on her as they sat next to each other in British Lit, his eyes wide and his smile slightly mischievous.

Needless to say El hadn't been able to stop smiling.

And she didn't see that changing anytime soon. When the bell rang for lunch, El went to her locker to put her books away and felt arms

wrap around her shoulders from behind and felt a pair of lips press against her hair.

“Hey.” Mike said softly, his voice low and close to her ear. “Have a good morning?” He asked, moving his arms and taking one of his hands in hers.

El nodded, her smile growing ever wider, the apples of her cheeks feeling like they might burst. “Yeah, it just got a little better, though.” She said and Mike smiled down at her.

The two, hand in hand, made their way to the quad to meet their friends and El’s heart drummed steadily and happily against her ribcage and a small grin stayed plastered on her face. It didn’t take long for El to realize that holding hands with Mike, *really* holding hands with him, was one of the best feelings in the entire world.

“You liar!” Was the first thing that El and Mike heard as they got into earshot of their table. It was Dustin and he was glaring at Max as he pointed at El and Mike.

Glancing at Mike, El felt her heart sped up uncomfortably in her chest, had Max told them? Mike, seeming to sense her discomfort, squeezed her hand assuredly.

“Dustin, what on earth are you talking about?” Mike asked, sounding exasperated, rolling his eyes. Looking around the table, El saw Max looking slightly ashamed, her face red and her eyes in her lap, while Will and Lucas both looked confused.

“Max told us that you two broke up the other day, she was warning us to just act natural and not say anything about it. You don’t look broken up though. In fact, you two look even more disgustingly in love then you did on Friday.” Dustin said, sounding in fact, disgusted at the sight of them holding hands, which caused El to roll her eyes.

Mike merely shrugged though, taking a seat at the table, bringing El with him. “We had a fight but we worked it out.” He said, giving her a small smile. “Everything’s perfect now.”

El grinned, biting her lip. “Yeah, it was just a disagreement, but we’re

all good now.” She said, giving each of her friends a smile. When she met Max’s eyes, her best friend looked embarrassed.

“Sorry.” Max whispered. El shrugged. At first she had feared that Max had decided to tell all their friends about the whole fake dating story, something that El wasn’t sure she ever wanted any of the guys to know about, but it did warm her heart to know her friend had been trying to make El more comfortable by asking their friends not to say anything about it.

However, she also knew that she was going to have to be doing a lot of explaining later.

Next to her, Will knocked her shoulder with his, giving her a grin when she met his gaze.

“How come you didn’t tell me about your fight?” He asked softly.

Smiling, El gave another small shrug. “I didn’t want to bother you at Dustin’s. I’ll tell you everything later, though.” She said with a small grin. Will smiled back, nodding.

Okay, so maybe she would tell Will everything. He was her *brother* after all. Actually, the more she thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed that her and Mike’s story would stay just between them and Max.

Mike squeezed her hand again, knocking his knee against hers under the table, and El realized that none of that really mattered as long as Mike kept squeezing her hand like that.

Luckily, the conversation didn’t linger on Mike and El for long, shifting quickly to something that had happened in Dustin and Max’s history class that morning, but El found it hard to pay attention to what her friends were saying.

Because El’s eyes kept drifting over to Mike, who looked even more handsome today than he usually did. He was wearing a soft yellow sweater that El had never seen before that made his freckles splash and his hair shine as he blew around him in the wind like a halo. It definitely wasn’t the first time she had caught herself staring at him,

but this time, when Mike looked over at her, feeling her eyes on him, she didn't look away. Instead, she grinned.

When the bell rang a couple minutes later, all their friends quickly got up, Lucas and Max needed to get all the way across the school for their math class, Dustin wanting to get to drama early and Will needing to talk to his English teacher before class started. This left Mike and El, who took their time standing up from the table and gathering their stuff.

It felt familiar, Mike and El's hands intertwined as their friends disappear from view, but there's one key difference this time. One that certainly doesn't go unnoticed by El, and one that she doesn't know if she'll ever stop being happy about.

This time, when Mike and El are left alone, their hands stay intertwined, with absolutely no sign of being disconnected any time soon.

Notes for the Chapter:

so, there we are. i hope this chapter made up for everything and that you enjoyed it!! writing the scene where mike admits his love was one of my favorite scenes to write, so i hope you all enjoyed it!!

let me know what you guys think!! i love hearing your comments so much and after the whirlwind i've forced all of you to go through, i would love to hear what you think of this chapter!!

thank you guys so much, i'll catch you next time for the epilogue! as always, hit me up on tumblr (finnwolfhards) if you want to yell at me!!

5. Epilogue

Notes for the Chapter:

hello my beautiful, wonderful friends. can you believe we've made it to the epilogue? feels like just yesterday these kids were getting themselves into a fake relationship and now here we are! thank you all so much for coming on this journey with me, i know it was short but i had a good time and i hope you all did too. thank you all for the support and wonderful comments and kudos. the response this fic has gotten has been amazing and something i never expected when i posted the first chapter.

as promised, this is nothing but pure shmoop and fluff and you might die? sorry in advance, but also i'm not sorry at all. i am however sorry for the delay, things are kinda crazy where i am, so it took longer than expected, BUT it's also about 2k words longer than anticipated, so hopefully that makes up for it!

once again, thank you so much to ally (paranoids) and julie (FateChica) for being my personal cheerleaders throughout the entire fic process, they're the best and i love them.

10 months later - September 1987

The first note appeared the moment she first woke up. Of course, it didn't magically appear in her bedroom, but it certainly felt like that when it showed up considering it hadn't been there the night before.

She was somewhere between blissful dreaming and morning grogginess when her hand felt the note on her bedside table. She had been aiming for her alarm, desperate to flip it off before it could ring, but the note was a more than worthy replacement.

Cracking an eye open, she felt herself smile against her pillow as she looked at it. The note was folded neatly, as they always are, written

on the familiar college ruled lined paper that he so often used. She knew exactly *who* the note was from, but that far from explained what it was doing on her bedside table.

Sitting up, she grabbed it with her fingers, excited curiosity pumping through her veins, a smile already stretching across her face. A sloppily drawn heart was etched into the paper, and El's own beat happily in her chest, even after months of drawing them, he *still* hadn't quite gotten the hang of them.

1. you're the smartest person at hawkins high

The handwriting, while not perfect, was careful and well thought out, the curves of the letters showing extra care and time going into them. The number throws her for a loop, it's not the first time Mike has written her a list, she has a particular memory of one day at the end of the last year where he wrote her a *very* long list of why she was the prettiest girl at Hawkins High. But, when she looks for another number, even flipping the paper over, she can't find one.

Shrugging, she pushes herself from her bed, dropping the note in the jar on her desk. Going through the usual motions of getting ready, it wasn't until she looked at her calendar after brushing her hair that she realized what day it was.

It was her birthday.

She didn't know why she didn't remember it sooner, Mike had even said something about it on the phone the night before, but she hadn't realized it until now. Did Mike's note have something to do with her birthday? Her heart pitter pattered happily at the thought.

For a moment, she allowed herself to remember her birthday last year, which had been uneventful, the evening spent on the couch with Will eating ice cream and nothing but a smile and a "*oh happy birthday, El.*" from Mike at lunch. She had no idea what to expect this year, but she could already tell that it was going to blow last year's out of the water.

She is absolutely *certain* that Mike will make sure of that.

When Mike picks her up for school about an hour later, she knows she shouldn't be as surprised as she is when she almost sits on another note.

It's delicately placed on the passenger seat, the folds done as carefully and precisely as the one she had found on her bedside table this morning and the heart a little more slanted and a little less obtuse. Mike is smiling at her from the driver's seat, looking equally parts proud and giddy and she picks the note up and sits down.

"Someone's proud of himself." El jokes as she buckles her seatbelt, unable to keep the wide smile off her face. Mike laughs, full and bright and El's heart threatens to burst of her chest.

Mike shrugs, "Hey, just wanted to make sure you had a good birthday, that's all." He says, giving her a smile.

"By doing what? Leaving me notes in all over the place and forcing my family to go along with it, unless you snuck in through my bedroom window last night." She raises her eyebrow at him, the earlier smile still dancing across her lips.

He laughs again, shaking his head. "Your brother was a willing participant once I told him what was going on. He's just as much of a sap as you are, sometimes." El giggles, resting her head against the back of her seat and sighing softly.

"You're such a nerd." She says, reaching over and shoving his shoulder lightly. Mike gasps, holding his hand to his chest in mock offense. She rolls her eyes, resisting the urge to laugh at him.

"I might be a nerd, but you're the one whose in love with me, so." He shrugs and El nods. He was right about that, she was in love with him, so much so that it made her entire body warm and her heart feel like it was glowing in her chest.

A beat of silence falls over them for a second and El can't seem to

stop smiling at him. Mike must feel her smile and eyes on him because he catches her gaze, returning her smile with a wide grin of his own, his dark brown eyes lighting up.

“Are you gonna open that note or just hold it in your hand all day.” He asks, gesturing to the note, which still lies unread and folding up in her grasp. El looks down in her lap, she had almost forgotten that it was there to begin with, too wrapped in the familiar bubble of love and happiness she often felt when she was with Mike.

“You want me to open it right now?” She asks, raising her eyebrow and Mike nods. “How many of these are you going to send me today, by the way? Should I be on the lookout for them? You’ve already given me more than you usually do in one day.” She asks, partly teasing but also mainly genuinely curious. While Mike writing her notes had been a tradition that had carried from their fake relationship last year to their real one, he usually stuck with one a day, typically slipping it into her locker during the school day.

Mike playfully groans, throwing his head back. “You’re asking too many questions, just open it.” He insists, and El relents, holding her free hand up in surrender.

She can feel his eyes on her as she unfolds the note, flattening it against her leg. The writing is the same careful and thoughtful script that the one earlier this morning had been and she smiles.

“Two. You are the funniest person I’ve ever met in my entire life and yes that includes Dustin.” She reads, feeling a wide grin fall upon her face at butterflies begin to flutter in her stomach. When her eyes lift from the paper in her hands to Mike, he’s looking at her in a way that makes her heart *thump thump thump* happily in her chest.

He’s shifted in his seat and his face is now only a couple of inches from hers. “Happy Birthday.” Before she can respond, his lips are pressing up against hers and she sighs happily. The kiss is brief but it’s enough to make El’s stomach swoop and her entire body warm.

“I love you.” He says once he’s facing forward in his seat again, putting his car in reverse. She had almost forgotten that they were on their way to school and if she was a little braver she would suggest

they skip school and spend the day doing something else.

“I love you too.” She says softly, reaching over and taking his hand that’s not on the steering wheel in her own and squeezing it. Mike’s eyes find hers and he smiles.

She smiles back, her entire body aglow with happiness and she knows then that yes, this was *definitely* going to be her best birthday ever.

Notes three, four and five all appear to her throughout the morning, each one even more stomach flutter inducing than the previous one.

It’s not a new feeling, the heart pounding and stomach swooping feeling, she experiences it often when reading Mike’s notes, especially ones of the *ahem* flirtier variety, but it feels different today. Special, somehow, in a way that El hasn’t quite been able to figure out.

She also hasn’t been able to figure out when Mike has been writing these notes, or how he’s been getting them to her.

Unlike last year, where her and Mike shared a total of one class together, most of their time at school together being spent holding hands in the quad during lunch or whispering and laughing in the AV room after school, her and Mike share a majority of their classes together this year. It’s something that El’s *adored* thus far, but it also means that she’s around Mike basically all morning and she hasn’t seen him write a single thing.

Note number three appears in her locker after first period, Mike is at his own locker a few rows down from her, sending her a smile when he feels his eyes on her and she can only laugh with a small shake of her head.

Unlike notes one and two, three is written on a piece of newspaper, something that causes her eyebrows to crinkle together in confusion. She doesn’t realize until she unfolds it, the heart on the front written in still wet ink and smudging slightly against her hand, that it’s from

today's newspaper, the date circled.

3. you make every single day the best day ever

She felt tears prick the corners of her eyes and she blinked them away, definitely *not* wanting to cry in the middle of the hallway, but it was certainly hard to resist. She was just so happy. Her heart was fluttering happily in her chest and she was pretty sure she had a permanent smile etched upon her face.

And it was only nine o'clock in the morning.

The next note came about forty five minutes later, this one seemingly appearing out of thin air on her desk in the middle of history class. One minute she's looking at the board, her eyes only away from her notes for a split second and the next, the note is sitting across her spiral notebook.

Looking around, she sees Mike a few rows behind her. They share this class, but due to assigned alphabetical seating, they don't get to sit next to each other. He's not looking at her, his eyes trained ahead of him at the board, but she can see the amusement twinkling in his eyes and the smile threatening to break through his lips.

Rolling her eyes in amusement, El turned back around in her seat, feeling Mike's eyes move to the back of her head. She resists the urge to look over her shoulder at him, instead unfolding the note and spreading it flat against her desk.

4. i could stare at you all day long. you make every class a thousand times more interesting.

Heart slamming in her chest, El took a deep breath, trying to dispel the warmth on her cheeks before it can become visible to her classmates. She doesn't need to look at him to know that Mike has a smirk on his face, a thought which makes her stomach dip.

She wonders if he knows that kind of affect that he has on her. If he knows that merely by telling her he looks at her during class has her heart racing and her breath shaky. He has to know, she certainly isn't very good at hiding it, if how warm her face feels right now was any

indication.

Damn him.

About an hour later El was standing at her locker, Max by her side as they got ready for lunch. Her best friend was twirling a finger through her red hair, telling a story about something that had happened in her physics class that morning, but El was barely listening. Her mind *occupied* .

Occupied because Mike was on the other end of the hallway, currently conversing with Lucas but El could see the folded up piece of paper pinched between his fingers.

“So, then, he totally slipped and it was the funniest thing I’ve seen in days.” Max said with a loud laugh, snapping El from her thoughts and bringing her attention back to Max, who was eyeing her suspiciously. “Were you listening to me at all?”

“Of course I was.” El said with a small huff, grabbing her lunchbox from the top shelf in her locker, closing it with resounding slam. She sniffs, folding her arms across her chest and meeting Max’s gaze.

Max rolls her eyes. “You know, just because it’s your birthday doesn’t mean you get to not listen to me and spend all your time dreaming about lover boy, alright?” El glares at her, not justifying her words with any kind of response, mainly because that’s exactly what she had been doing. “Speaking of your birthday, we’re still on for Friday, right?”

El nods, a smile forming on her lips. “Of course.” Ever since her and Mike had officially started dating, El had made it known that Fridays were for her and Max, their tradition, and Mike had always, *always* honored that. The only exception had been back in May, when Mike’s grandmother had been in the hospital and he had needed help with Holly overnight while his mom was away. “Mike and I are celebrating tomorrow and my family is celebrating tonight, so Friday is all yours.”

Max grins, clearly pleased. She opens her mouth, like she wants to say something, but closes it only seconds later. El feels her eyebrows

curl together in confusion, but before she can question it, she feels arms sneak around her waist and a pair of lips press against the skin of her neck and she can't resist sighing.

"Hey." Mike's voice is soft and smooth like honey right above the shell of her ear and he's so close to her, she can practically smell his ocean breeze shampoo and the detergent his mom uses. It smells like heaven and she wants to bottle it up and keep it with her forever.

"Hi." She says, just as softly, turning around and facing him. She doesn't have to look to see that Max and Lucas have already disappeared, knowing well enough already that El and Mike are currently existing in their own little world.

"Are you having a good birthday so far?" Mike asks, tightening his hands around her waist and pulling her slightly closer to him. El felt herself practically melt, her heart flipping.

She nodded. "It's even better now." A wide grin fell upon Mike's face and El could practically see the light brighten in his eyes.

"Good." Mike said simply, leaning forward and kissing her quickly. The touch of their lips was brief and simple, but it still made El's veins burn with adrenaline. Grabbing her hand, Mike squeezed it and slowly the two of them started to make their way towards the cafeteria. "By the way, my mom wants you to come over for dinner tomorrow night, once she found out it was your birthday, she insisted on making you dinner and celebrating."

El laughs, nodding. At first it was just going to be her and Mike celebrating, but his mother and his sister being involved was just as good to her. Truthfully, she *adores* the fact that Mike's mom wants to help her celebrate her birthday, and it always makes her feel warm inside that his mother likes her so much.

"Oh! Before I forget." Mike stops them, tugging her hand lightly. They're standing by the double doors that lead outside, the two of them seeming to be the only ones that haven't made it to the quad yet. Wordlessly he pressed the piece of paper he was holding in his own fingers into her palm, the item warm and a little damp in her hands.

El smirked, flipping the note over in her palm, the heart slightly faded from how much time it spent pressed against Mike's skin. "How many of these am I going to get today?" She asks, her voice light and teasing. Mike rolls his eyes playfully, smirking.

"That's need to know information." He teases, running his hand that's not in hers through her hair, tugging it playfully.

She frowns, removing her hand from his so she can read the note. Mike is smiling at her as she does, a look of excited anticipation etched in the lines of his face. El wants to tease him about but then she reads the note and her breath catches in her throat.

"Five. Your smile is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my entire life." She whispers, her stomach swooping. Mike's face is spread in a genuine smile, his eyes soft and warm on her. "You are such a sap."

"Maybe so." He says with a small shrug, not looking the least bit embarrassed or ashamed. That's something she's always loved and appreciated about Mike, how unashamed he was about his feelings for her. Slinging his arm over her shoulder, he squeezes and she leans into his embrace. "But you love me anyway."

That she did, *so much*. So much that she felt it from the tips of her toes to the very top of her head. She loved him with every fiber in her being, and he loved her too.

And that's all she really needed.

If El was impressed by Mike's skills in the morning, she's downright floored during the afternoon.

This is mainly because, not only does she manage to amass seven notes from the end of lunch until the last bell of the day, but she only sees Mike a total of three times during the afternoon.

Once is during their anatomy lab, in which he slides note number 8 across their shared lab table. The heart is drawn in red ink, evident that it was written during Mike's english class when he was editing his classmate's essays. The note is folded nice and flat, perfect for gliding across the surface of their table and it knocks into El's elbow. When she looks down the table at Mike, he's looking ahead at the board, the ghost of a smile on his lips.

The teacher is lecturing and keeps glancing over at their table, so El doesn't open it yet. But, she can see the indent of the letters against the notebook paper, and she can feel the ridges of where he pressed down hard with his pen with her fingers.

It isn't until class is dismissed and the bell is ringing when she finally gets a chance to read it, the words make her blush and Mike merely sends her a wink as he exits the classroom, sending an excited tingle down her spine.

8. i love the way that your skin feels under my fingertips

However, of all the notes she receives that afternoon, that's the one of the only ones that comes directly from Mike. She doesn't know whether or not she should be impressed, actually no she's *definitely* impressed, or slightly creeped out by how he manages to insert himself throughout her day via notes.

Number six appears in the front pocket of her backpack, which she discovers right after lunch while looking for her pencil. She's in calculus and Will is eyeing her with a confused look on his face. She grins sheepishly while also wondering *when* Mike had managed to slip it in there considering it definitely hadn't been there before lunch.

He must have slipped it into her backpack while they were eating, likely when he had wrapped his arm around her. She had been too absorbed in Dustin's rendition of Happy Birthday to her to notice what Mike had been doing.

6. your hair is so pretty, i have to resist running my fingers through it every time i see you

Reading the note quietly to herself, she smiles, holding it tightly against her chest and she can feel her heart thumping against her hand. Happiness was bubbling up inside of her and she really hoped that her teacher didn't think it was because she was enjoying calculus because that definitely *wasn't* the case.

The one she becomes most impressed by in number seven. Not necessarily because of the contents, which read “ *7. i hate the classes when i don't get to see you. they're the worst part of my day*” but because of *how* he manages to get it to her. It comes to her during her French class, which is one of her favorites of the day, so she's rather enraptured by the lesson at hand.

So, color her extremely surprised when she reaches into the pocket of her hoodie to grab her chapstick (turns out constantly biting your lip because you're trying not to laugh when your boyfriend distracts you during class causes your lips to become chapped) and her fingers brush up a piece of paper. Feeling her eyes go wide, she pulls the piece of paper out, turning it over in her hand. The familiar heart is embedded on the front of the note, which is written instead of on the usual lined paper, but instead of pink construction paper.

Looking around the room, she feels her heart pound quickly and harshly in her chest, a weird anxious feeling bubbling up inside of her. *Where had this come from?* She knew it was from Mike, the heart said it all, but how had it gotten inside of her pocket. It certainly hadn't been there last period and she hadn't seen him on her way to French, so Mike couldn't be behind it's delivery.

Finally, her eyes land on a mass of brown curls in the back of the room.

Dustin.

He's avoiding her glance, looking at the wall next to him. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately for him, Dustin is the least subtle person in the entire world, so he's going to great lengths to not look at her and his face says it all. He's got a shit eating grin on his face, but he's trying to desperately, and failing miserably to hide it and she immediately knows that he's the one behind slipping the note in her pocket.

It makes her feel bad, but she honestly usually forgets that Dustin is in this class with her. She doesn't mean to, of course, she loves Dustin, really she does, he's funny and sweet, but since their seats are so far away from each other and French is one of the only classes that she *always* pays attention in, she doesn't notice him most days. Which is likely why Mike asked for his help. *God*, he was really on top of things wasn't he. She had mentioned off handedly a couple weeks ago that her and Dustin rarely talked in French class and he had not only remembered it, but he had then used that information weeks later.

It made her feel bad for girls whose boyfriends weren't as great as hers.

But it also made her really, really happy that she had a boyfriend like Mike. Actually no, scratch that, it made her really happy her boyfriend was Mike. But that was far from a new feeling.

Turns out, however, that Dustin and Will weren't the only one of their friends who Mike had convinced to help him. As note number nine came to her courtesy of none other than, Max.

El is standing by her locker, grabbing her books for last period, trying her hardest not to give in to her urge that's telling her to go to Mike's car and take a nap until school gets out. It should honestly be illegal to go to school on one's birthday, the last thing she wants to be doing right now is going to *geology* class.

"Heads up!" She's so wrapped up in her own world that she barely has time to react as her best friend yells at her, a piece of folded up paper bouncing off her nose as she turns to look for the source of the voice. The note falls to the floor unceremoniously at El's feet, the hand drawn heart staring at up at her, as Max smirks, leaning against the locker next to her.

"Why would you do that?" El asks, rubbing the tip of her nose and bending down to pick up the note. "Did Mike ask you to throw this at me?" She holds the note up in front of Max's eyes, who merely shrugs, looking down at her fingernails.

"Not in so many words, no." Max said, smirking. "This was just my interpretation of his instructions." El rolls her eyes, flipping the note

between her fingers.

“Well, thank you. Much appreciated.” El deadpans, closing her locker and turning to her friend, who is still very much smirking and looks *extremely* proud of herself. “What exactly were you instructed to do?”

Max shrugs, coming to El’s side so they can walk to geology, one of the few classes they share. “Eh, not important now.” There’s a pause and El looks down at the note as her and Max begin walking. “So, what’s it say?”

El scoffs. “Yeah, nice try.” She laughs, shaking her head. “I didn’t even share Mike’s notes to me when we were fake dating, I’m certainly not going to share them with you now.”

“Fine, fine. Be like that. Besides I bet I already know what it says anyway.” Max says, grinning slyly, wiggling her eyebrows. El raises her eyebrows, resisting the urge to snort. “*El, I love you so much, you’re so beautiful and I have no idea what I would do without you!*” Max practically sings, clapping her hands together when she finishes, a fake dreamy look on her face.

El doesn’t give her a response, merely bumping her shoulder and continuing on to class. The bell is about to ring and as much as El hates this class, she doesn’t want to be late. Max is still laughing behind her and that laughter continues until the two step into the classroom.

While Max didn’t get Mike’s note exactly right, she’s not far off on what note number nine says. 9. *you’re just...so beautiful and it’s a real mystery as to what you see in a guy like me* . The words tug on El’s heart in a way that makes her want to find Mike immediately and give him the biggest hug she can manage, but she still can’t help but smile at his compliment.

She’s in the middle of asking herself exactly how he’s going to continue to impress her, already zoning out her teacher, but still turning to the next blank page in her notebook to at least look like she’s paying attention, when she gets her answer. Because, taped to the open page of her notebook was note number ten.

10. you deserve to have the best birthday ever every single year

The words were written across the white paper (which upon investigation was actually just the backside of one of Mike's old calculus quizzes) and surrounded by what seemed like hundreds of small hearts, some of them drawn precisely and carefully, while others were a little more haphazard. But, El still loves them all the same.

She spent the rest of class with a wide grin on her face, her heart dancing happily in her chest as she reread notes nine and ten over and over and over again until it seemed like the words were glued into her memory. When class was finally dismissed, El felt like she was floating as she exited the classroom, barely noticing the very subject of her daydream waiting for her.

"Hey." Mike's voice seemed to come out of nowhere, snapping her from her thoughts. Her eyes found him immediately, her already wide smile growing ever wider as she closed the distance between them.

"Hi." She said softly, leaning up to press a small kiss to his lips, her arms going around his waist, hands clasping at the small of his back. Mike smiled against her lips, and El's stomach bubbled happily.

"Have you been having a good birthday?" He asks, and she nods. "Good, because here, hopefully this will make even just a little bit better." He says, reaching into his pocket and pulling out another note. El practically rolls her eyes.

"Another one?" She asks, amusement laced in her voice. She hopes she doesn't come off as ungrateful because, please, she's anything but, but this is getting a little ridiculous. "This is what, number eleven." She knows exactly what number note it is, so she doesn't know why she says it like that. Maybe because she's still trying to grasp the fact that Mike has written her that many notes and the day still isn't over.

Mike nods, pursing his lips. "Yep, and this one is special." He says, placing the note into her hands. "Not that the other ones weren't.

But, this one is extra special.” His smile is practically glowing and El feels like her heart might burst out of her chest.

Smiling at him, she unfolds the note slowly, not missing the small doodle of two stick figures holding hands that accompanies the heart on the front. Biting her bottom lip as she reads, she quickly blinks away the tears that suddenly sting the corners of her eyes.

“Eleven. You’re the best girlfriend in the entire world.” She looks at him, smiling. “How can you know that for sure when I’m the only girlfriend you’ve ever had?” She teases, knocking his arm with her shoulder as she grabs his hand.

Mike shrugs, beginning to lead them down the hallway towards her locker. “Because, I can’t imagine there being a better one out there, so naturally I deduced that you’re the best one in the entire world. Unfortunately for the rest of the world, I’m the only one who’s ever going to experience having you as a girlfriend but, they’ll all have to take my word for it.” He smirks and El feels her body tingle excitedly.

It’s not the first time that her and Mike have talked about the future, they both know that what they have together is something special and something they probably will never find anywhere else. But regardless, it still makes her head spin a little bit when he so bluntly states about how he wants to be with her forever. In the best way possible, of course.

El can only shake her head at him before they reach her locker, and Mike has another excited smile on her face. She briefly wonders if he’s always been this unsubtle and she never noticed, or if he just can’t contain his excitement. She hopes it’s the latter.

“There’s another note in my locker, isn’t there?”

“Maybe.” Mike says, shrugging his shoulders innocently. “You’ll have to ask Lucas, not me.”

El rolls her eyes, yanking her locker open. Unsurprisingly, a piece of folded up paper falls delicately to the floor, landing in between her and Mike. “I can’t believe you convinced all of our friends to help you.”

Mike leans down, grabbing the paper between his fingers. "I didn't convince them, they offered to help when I mentioned it to them." El raises her eyebrows because *yeah right*, she'll believe that Dustin and Will offered, but Max? Offering to help? Yeah, that didn't happen. "Ok fine, Will offered to help and Dustin said yes when I asked, but they still all eventually caved. Even if I did have to promise Max I would let her decide what our next campaign is about, she did agree to help me."

El laughs, remembering exactly how Max had "helped" earlier. "Well, I don't know what exactly you asked her to do, but all she did was throw it at me." Mike rolls her eyes, looking annoyed but ultimately unsurprised.

"Here, I promise that this one won't be thrown at you and that all Lucas did was slip it into your locker because his class was right across the hall and mine was on the other side of the building."

"Yeah, how did you manage to get to my class as soon as the bell rung?" El asks, wrinkling her eyebrows together.

Mike blushes, looking down at the ground. "I may or may not have asked to go the bathroom like five minutes before class ended and then not gone back."

"Mike!"

"Hey, you loved seeing me as soon as your class got out!"

"Ok, true, I did. But don't do it again, I don't want you to get in trouble on my behalf." El says, a smile dancing across her lips.

"Fine, fine. It don't happen again." He doesn't sound like he means it, but El doesn't question him, instead she directs her attention to the paper that's somehow made its way into her hands without her even noticing.

There's a beat of silence between them as El unfolds it, Mike's eyes never leaving hers and his smile never wavering. "Twelve. You're so incredibly kind to everyone you meet, it honestly inspires me."

Mike's eyes are soft and El feels like she's going to cry again.

“Do you really mean that?” Mike nods, closing the small distance between them and pressing his lips against hers. She practically melts against him, feeling happiness and contentedness explode through her veins.

“I promise you that everything written in these notes is one hundred percent the truth.” He whispers when they’ve pulled apart, resting his forehead against hers. “I’m just trying make sure you know how much I love you for your birthday.”

El has no idea how she managed to get so lucky, but *god* is she not complaining in the slightest. Mike Wheeler is truly an angel sent from heaven above, he has to be, there’s no other explanation, and for some reason, he chose to be with her of all people.

“Now come one, let’s get out of here. No one should be in school this long on their birthday.” Mike says, slinging his arm around her shoulder. El laughs.

“That was my thought exactly.” She agrees, allowing Mike to lead her down the hallway, trailing after him like he was the north star and she was a lost traveler.

And she knew deep down that she would follow him anywhere.

By the time El got home a couple hours later, she felt like she was floating on a cloud and living in a dream.

Mike had slipped her two more notes before dropping her off at home, both of them equally as schmoopy and filled with love as the ones before. El was certainly not complaining though, not at all.

Thirteen had been in Mike’s glove compartment. Revealed to her when Mike asked for a napkin, which he also conveniently left in the glove compartment, after spilling water on his corduroys. El didn’t know if the water spill was a part of the plan, or just a timely coincidence, but after pulling a napkin out to help her now wet

boyfriend at least partially dry off, she discovered the note.

13. your eyes are so deep and beautiful i want to get lost in them . The note had read, which caused El to blush. Mike had been temporarily distracted by his wet pants, but he had still smiled dreamily at her when she thanked him and kissed his cheek.

Note fourteen had come a little while later, shuffled between bags of chips and sodas that Mike gifted her to munch on while they did homework at his house, a tradition that had started since they officially started dating last November.

At first she hadn't even noticed it, passed it off as a scrap piece of paper, but then her fingers skimmed and felt the unmistakable indent of a heart, this one deep, outlined in pen much like note number eight had been.

Mike didn't notice she had discovered it, too absorbed in his advanced physics homework (which looked like absolute *torture* if you asked her), his forehead furrowed in concentration. She smirked, taking the opportunity to read it without him looking at her.

14. i'm so glad that not only are you my girlfriend but also one of my best friends because you're the greatest friend in the entire world

Let's just say that Mike wasn't so focused on his physics homework after that.

El is still blushing a little bit when he drops her off a little before dinner, her heart beating a little faster than normal as she waves goodbye to him and enters her house. Her dad's not home yet, but Joyce is in the kitchen, singing softly to herself as she starts dinner.

"Hey sweetheart!" She calls from within the house. El hears shuffling before her step mother appears in the entryway doorway, a smile on her face. "Did you have a good day at school? I know it must stink to have to spend your birthday at school."

El shrugs, putting her jacket on the hook and placing her shoes by the front door. "It wasn't that bad, Mike certainly made sure of that." She tries to keep the warmth on her cheeks from spreading, but based on

the wide eyed, eyebrow raising look Joyce gives her, she fails.

"Well, I'm glad that you enjoyed your day, even if you did have to go to school." Joyce says, smiling. "Oh sweetheart, there's a little something on your desk that I was asked to give to you."

El crinkles her eyebrows together, curiosity bubbling inside her. "Alright, thanks, Joyce." She gives her step mom a smile before starting her descent up the stairs to her room.

By the time she enters her bedroom, she has a sneaking suspicion she knows *exactly* what's waiting for her and she's proven right when she glances at her desk and sees note number fifteen looking up at her. This note is written on what looks like a receipt? El can't tell.

Grabbing it, she flips it over, her heart jumping into her throat when she realizes that *yes* this is a receipt. A receipt dated December 3, 1987 from the diner across town, the exact date and location of her and Mike's first real date. Tears are swimming in her eyes before she even reads what he wrote.

15. you understand me better than anyone else in the entire world. talking to you is as easy as breathing. thank you for always listening and always being there.

Something clicks in her as she reads his words. His words that are so clearly directly from his heart and chosen and written with vulnerability and nerves. Mike had always worn his heart on his sleeve, but even this seemed valuable and personal, that he must love and trust her a lot to confide this in her.

God she loves him so much, more than she ever expected to. Sure, she's always known of her feelings for him, since the minute she met him she's held some sort of affection for him. But what she feels now is the deepest kind of love she thinks anyone can feel for another person, it's almost like he's a part of her, and that not loving him would feel like she lost a part of herself.

She can only hope as she clutches the 9 month old receipt in her hands that she'll never have to know what the feels like.

Later that night, after dinner and cake and presents with her family, her heart and stomach both full and satisfied, El is sitting in her room, letting the events of the day settle.

All of Mike's notes are scattered around her on her bed, and she's rereading them one by one, smiling as she goes. Her heart is so full of love for this boy that she's afraid she might burst. She's in the middle of reading note number ten again when a knock on her door interrupts her.

"Come in." She says softly, smiling when her dad appears, stepping into her room. "Hey dad."

"Hey, sweetheart." He says, coming over and sitting next to her on the bed, surveying the mass of papers as he does, his eyebrows raising. "What are you doing?"

"Mike wrote me a bunch of notes for my birthday so I'm rereading them." She says with a small shrug, tucking her hair behind her ears, giving him a grin.

Her dad smiles. "Did you have a good birthday this year?"

"Yeah, I had a really good birthday. The best, honestly." She says, genuinely meaning it. Despite the fact that she spent most of her day at school and doing homework, the day was still great and she mostly had Mike to thank for that.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that." Her dad whispers, leaning over and pressing a kiss to her forehead. "I'm sure your mom would have wanted to be here." He says against her hair, bringing his hand to her shoulder and squeezing slightly. El feels tears well up in her eyes and she takes a deep breath.

Her dad says that to her every year on her birthday and every year it hurts a little bit more that she's not there. That El will spend the rest of her birthdays without her. Luckily she has her dad and Joyce and

Will and her friends and Mike to make her birthdays a little brighter.

“I wish she was here.” El whispered against her dad’s chest, sighing. “But I’m glad I still have you.”

Her dad laughs, nodding against El’s head. “Yeah, yeah you do and I’m not going anywhere anytime soon. I assure you of that.”

Removing herself from her dad’s embrace, El gives him a watery smile, which he returns, tears visible in his eyes as well. They don’t talk about her mom as much now, too happy and wrapped up in their lives now, but El is glad they can still talk about her like this and remember her.

“Here, I was supposed to give you this.” Her dad says suddenly, pulling something from the pocket of his flannel. At first El can’t tell what it is, but then she realizes exactly what it is and she almost laughs. Mike really got everything in her family involved too.

“You too?” El teases, shaking her head and removing the note from her dad’s fingers.

“Yeah, kid convinced me to help him out.” Her dad snorts. “He asked me not to read it, so of course I did, and I think you found yourself a real keeper there. Don’t tell the kid, but I think I’m really starting to like him.”

El smiles, her heart glowing. “Please, you love him and you know it.”

Getting up from her bed, her dad shakes his head, moving towards the door. “You can’t prove that.” Hand hovering over the door, her dad smiles. “Happy birthday, El. I love you.”

“I love you too, dad.” They share a soft smile before she’s alone again, another addition to her collection now sitting in her lap. She definitely was *not* expecting this, but she’s also hardly surprised.

There’s something different about the paper that this note is written on, instead of lines, it’s covered in symbols, hearts randomly scattered throughout. El is confused before she realizes what it is, *it’s music notes* . Is this note written on a piece of sheet music?

Unfolding it and flipping the note over so she can read the backside, her stomach swoops and definitely not the first time El feels as though she might cry. Note sixteen is written on sheet music to Auld Lang Syne, her mom's favorite song. With shaky hands and uneven breaths, El turns the note back over to read her boyfriend's words.

16. your mom would be so, so proud of you, just like i am.

For the first time that day, El lets tears slip down her cheeks, Mike's words filling her entire body up with love and happiness that brings her to tears. She has to bit down on her bottom lip to keep from smiling too much and all she wants to do is run to Mike's house and hug him and tell him how much she loves him.

But she knows she can't, it's almost 11 and it's dark out and Mike's mom would probably *not* be impressed if she showed up in the middle of the night. And El really wanted to stay on Karen's good side. So, instead she settles for holding the note to her chest, counting down the minutes until she can see Mike again.

Luckily, and also maybe a little unsurprisingly considering all the other events of the day, El doesn't have to wait nearly as long as she thinks she has to to see him. Because at 11:11, there's a knock on her window.

By then, El is almost half asleep, the notes still scattered on her bed and her bedside lamp basking the room in a soft glow. Mike doesn't wait for her to let him in before he's pushing the window open and climbing in, smiling at her when she looks at him.

"What are you doing here?" She asks softly, a wide grin on her face as she gets up off her bed and meets him by the window. There's a light flush to his cheeks, evident of the light chill outside and his hair looks tousled by the wind, but El has never seen a sight more beautiful.

"I wanted to come and see you one more time on your birthday." Mike whispers, erasing the small distance between them by kissing her softly. El sighs happily against his lips, enjoying every second of the moment. "Also, I wanted to give you one more thing."

El expects a note, number seventeen, but instead she's given the feeling of soft, warm cotton around her shoulders and she realizes that he's giving her his sweatshirt. The well worn, navy blue hoodie he's had for years. The one she always steals but he always takes back.

"You're giving me your hoodie?" She asks, slightly amused.

Mike chuckles, nodding. "Yeah, I think it's time I realize it's doesn't fit anymore and it looks way better on your anyway." El smiles, snuggling into it and taking a deep breath, smiling when she realizes it still smells like him. "There's also something else in the pocket." He winks and El rolls her eyes.

Reaching into the pocket, her fingers hit the piece of paper and she blushes. Pulling it out she looks at him, and Mike is looking at her with the most besotted and loving expression she's ever seen and she decides that she wants to live in this very moment for the rest of her life. "Note number seventeen." She comments, running the note between her fingers.

He nods. "One for every year that you've blessed the world with your existence." El giggles, feeling happiness and love and affection and warmth all bubble up inside of her, so much so that she fears she might explode. "Also known as seventeen things that I've learned to be true about you in the years I've known you and the months I've gotten to love you."

El feels warmth spread across her cheeks and she can't resist it then, reaching out and pulling him against her, wrapping her arms around him and giving him the biggest hug that she can manage. "Thank you. Thank you for making this the best birthday of my life and thank you for loving me." She whispers against his chest, swallowing roughly when she feels his lips press against the top of her head.

"You don't have to thank me for any of that. Your birthday was the least I could do and loving you, that's something you never have to thank me for." Mike says softly, holding her tightly. El doesn't think she's ever felt as safe and as loved as she does in this very moment.

They stay there for a couple minutes, or maybe it's a couple hours, El

can't tell, just holding each other and basking in each other's company, but eventually Mike pulls away. "I wish I could stay but I need to leave, my mom will kill me if she notices I'm gone."

El nods, sad, but also understanding. "I understand, I'm still invited over tomorrow, right?"

Mike laughs, nodding. "Of course, my mom has already starting cooking I'm pretty sure." El smiles. "I promise I have a real present for you, so I'm gonna give that to you tomorrow."

"Mike, you didn't have to get me a real present, these notes are more than enough."

He shakes his head in protest. "No, no. I wanted to. There's a difference between have to and want you. You deserve everything El, and I'm trying my best to give that to you." El is absolutely sure that no one has ever loved another person as much as Mike loves her (well except maybe her and her love for him), and that thought makes her feel like she's floating on air.

Mike kisses her again, soft and sweet. His lips linger over hers and she sighs. "I love you." He whispers against her lips, his breath sweet and cool against her face. "Happy Birthday, El."

"I love you too." She whispers, and he smiles. She misses him the minute he starts to walk away from her, and she wishes he didn't have to go, but she knows it won't be long before morning comes and she sees him again. So, instead of protesting, she smiles and gives him a small wave as he disappears out her window. Her heart is happily skipping in her chest and his hoodie feels warm around her.

It's then that she remembers note seventeen, still unread in her fingers. Shakily, she unfolds it, smiling as she sees the hearts that adorn the page, *happy birthday el* visible in the top left corner.

17. mike wheeler loves el hopper with all of his heart and he always will. that's a promise.

Pinching herself, El grins when she feels a shoot of pain up her arm. Mike loves her and she loves him and to think, this all started with a

little white lie, a list of rules and a fake relationship.

But this, this note in her hand, and all the notes scattered across her bedspread, and the hoodie around her frame and her cracked window where Mike didn't close it all the way. The love that she has for him and the love he has for her. That's all very, very much real.

And El wouldn't have it any other way.

Notes for the Chapter:

oh wow. i'm actually kinda emo that this story is over. i had so much fun writing it and i'm so happy so many people loved it and have been supportive of this story. it's been a wonderful journey and i'm glad you all were on it with me. hopefully this epilogue was a worthy ending.

as always, please tell me what you thought in the comments, your comments and kind words mean the world to me, so please leave me your thoughts! i love you all. so much.

ALSO as always, come hit me up on tumblr (finnwolfhards) if you have other thoughts you want to share with me. my inbox over there is always open even if i take 900 years to get back to someone. haha.